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Can You Imagine?

Kati and Willi
Living After

as told to D.Z. Stone

Happy Birthday Bill
1964

In April of 1964, the New York Times reported that the largest concentration of luxury homes in the City was not on Park Avenue or off Sutton Place, but in Forest Hills, Queens. The only house with a double lot and swimming pool in the Cord Meyer section of leafy and exclusive Forest Hills. This is where Willi Salcer celebrated his fortieth birthday on a hot June summer night .

How surprised Willi had been when he returned home from his Jersey City factory and his wife Kati led him outside. No wonder she had called and asked him to come home earlier than his usual time, eight or nine. She had a big surprise.

"Happy Birthday, Bill!"

After Willi thanked Kati for the party, he excused himself so he could change. Thinking her husband was someone who preferred his own company, Kati warned him in a nice way, "Don't you take too long."

Willi has always been a loner who doesn't need close friends. This is his character. I am the social one in the marriage.

I know Kati believes this, but this is not entirely true. I was not always a loner. I once had many friends.

The backyard was filled with guests who looked to be having a good time. This much Willi could see from his living room picture window. Newly showered and dressed, he took it all in, this fantasy that was now his life. Ten-year-old Ronnie rushing out of a cabana and in for a swim. There was Kati at the outdoor bar, talking and laughing with the party guests. Not far from Kati was Naomi, now sixteen in a pretty party dress.

How could this be?

How could Willi be the father of a girl now almost a woman?

Wasn't it only yesterday that Naomi was ten, like Ronnie is now, and he was taking her to soccer games in Israel? Kati did not like soccer, and Ronnie was too young, so Naomi had become his soccer buddy. That's what he called her, his soccer buddy. Now she was looking very grownup in high heels.

Naomi was sixteen. I remember thinking how this was the same age as her mother when I first met Kati in the ghetto.

Willi stood at the picture window and couldn't help but think: what if the SS were to storm in this very moment and drag every Jew from the finest house in Forest Hills? Willi would not survive, not at forty.

No one over forty survived Mauthausen.

No, Willi would not survive. Neither would his son Ronnie. The child would die with his mother. The boy would be among the women and children shipped to Auschwitz. At ten years of age, Ronnie would be considered useless for work and immediately sent to the gas by Dr. Mengele. Kati, as the mother of a young child, would be sent with her son. Perhaps she would have a chance if she did not hold Ronnie's hand, but Willi could not see his wife letting go of the boy to save herself. She would ignore the Polish prisoners who warned new arrivals, "Do not hold your child's hand."

If Kati heard this, she would hold onto Ronnie even tighter, just like her mother had held onto Kati's younger brother Alexander. But Naomi, a healthy and strong girl of sixteen, would be sent to the right, to work. If she were lucky, like her mother, she would survive.

What would Naomi do when she returned home to Forest Hills to find everyone gone? Would she move into one of the swimming pool cabanas in the same way her mother had moved into the tiny workman's cottage in the garden behind her big house in Czechoslovakia? Would Naomi take up residence on the property so she could be a constant reminder to the people living inside that the house was hers and not theirs?

Kati had made me this beautiful party and I stood inside for the longest time watching everything from the living room picture window. Maybe it was too beautiful. I stood waiting for it all to go away. It had been my experience that everything good in life had gone away, and without warning. Family. Friends. Everything.

What was keeping her husband from the party? Finally, Kati went inside to see.

"Willi, if you stand at the window all night you are going to miss your own birthday."

Yes, Willi thought. Everyone wanted to wish Bill a happy birthday.

Bill.

Now Willi was Bill.

Before Bill, he had been Willi.

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Forty years ago, Pubi.

"When you were born, Pubi," his mother would tell him, "You not only had a beautiful thick head of hair, but it was parted like a finished hairdo. That's why we called you Pubi."

What had upset me most when my hair fell out after Mauthausen was how people looked at me. I could see the pity for the athletic boy now thin, bald and with rotted teeth.

Willi combed his hair in the smoked living room mirror, smiling at himself, glad the success of the factory had enabled him to not only buy a fine house but to treat both Kati and himself to new teeth. Especially Kati. He liked that he could give his wife the smile he remembered, the smile she had when he met her, the smile of a sixteen-year-old girl in love.

You see the beautiful teeth Willi gave me? He had my teeth fixed after we came to America. The best caps money could buy. That's what Willi did for me.

"Look at you. As handsome as the day I met you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Maybe I lie a little. What difference does it make as long as you believe me?"

That night at the party everyone would say what a beautiful family. Did you know Bill has a big factory in Jersey City that makes plastic lace tablecloths? You must know these tablecloths. All the big department stores have them. They look like real handmade lace but only cost a fraction of the price. What's more, you can throw them in the washing machine. Bill must be a millionaire from these tablecloths. Imagine he came here from Israel only four years ago. I don't know where they were before that. Sounds like somewhere in Europe. I can't tell by the accent. Aren't they a lovely family? Bill is so handsome and Kati so attractive and beautifully dressed. The children are so well mannered and polite. And can you believe this house? Eleven rooms. Double lot. Swimming pool. Must have cost him a mint.

Some people seem to have everything. Some people have all the luck.

Lebensraum
1938

In the summer of 1938, ten-year-old Kati Kellner's concerns pretty much centered on riding her bicycle up and down the main street of her small Czech village. She didn't know anything about Hitler. But Willi Salcer, fourteen at the time, remembers the end of Czechoslovakia.

More and more, Willi would hear Hitler on the radio yelling, "Lebensraum." Hitler wanted this Lebensraum or living space. He said he needed more air to breathe, and it soon became apparent that he wanted to expand his lungs all over Czechoslovakia.

Created as a new state in 1918 after the First World War, Czechoslovakia was carved from part of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. The only democracy in central Europe, the country became one of the world's top-ten industrial nations. And relatively speaking, it was a good place to be a Jew. Certainly there were varying degrees of anti-Semitism on the local level—especially in Slovakian villages with large ethnic Hungarian populations—but by law, Jews had full freedom.

What living space Hitler said he needed was the Sudetenland, the area of Czechoslovakia that bordered Germany, and the Czechs didn't want to give it up. It would be crazy to lose their fortified frontier, leaving nothing between them and Germany.

Riled by Hitler's talk of bringing all Germans into the fold so they'd be free to express their Germanism, the almost three million Sudete Germans started yelling, "We want Germany!" There was much unrest. Widespread rioting. Then Hitler demanded the Sudete Germans be given the right to self-determination, making it clear he was ready to fight over this.

Czechoslovakia was certain the countries with which it had cross-protection treaties would come to its aid. All the adults around Willi kept saying it would be so. But its allies, including Britain and France, abandoned Czechoslovakia. No one was willing to go to war over the Sudete. After all, it was reasoned, the Sudete was mostly ethnic Germans, and maybe if they let Hitler have this territory he would quiet down and Europe would have peace.

To appease Hitler, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, with France in approval, proposed a conference.

Hitler agreed and they met in Munich.

Czechoslovakia was not invited to its own dismemberment.

Hitler was given the Sudetenland, about ten thousand square miles of Czech territory, Poland a four hundred square mile patch, and Hungary a wide swath of Czechoslovakia's Slovakia and Ruthenia. Hungary's slice was five thousand square miles of land, inhabited by about a million people, including the families of Katarina Kellner and William Salcer.

Memory is not too Perfect
1998

My memory is not too perfect. We have no diary of this time and I have to tell you that we tried not to talk about it. Not at all. Especially my wife Kati. It was just too painful. We have decided to do this because our son wants to know what happened.

Willi is right. We never talked about it, even to our children. When they asked I volunteered as little as possible. Now our son wants this book. I appreciate your patience. No matter how much I prepare myself, I cannot help but get overwhelmed. Last night—all night—I had nightmares. Willi sits here watching TV and I am in bed, asleep and screaming. After so many years, I don't know. Can I call myself oversensitive? Our son wants the entire story. So we decided to tell you everything. Otherwise, what's the point?

Polka Dot Dress
August 1945

When Kati knocked, Willi was thinking of his next meal. Willi thought about food a lot since Mauthausen and Gunskirchen. Pots of boiled potatoes and cabbage. Pans of roasted black market meat. Willi ate all day, thanks to the box of gold watches a family friend had handed him when he returned. All that was left of a family fortune. Willi spent it on groceries for himself and his younger sister Lilly. All that was left of his family.

Kati Kellner had not seen Willi Salcer since the spring of 1944, and if she were shocked that he carried at most 110 pounds on his 6'1" frame, she didn't mention it. She was in love, and only saw the handsome boy she had met in the ghetto.

Okay, maybe I lie a little. When I first saw Willi after the War, I could see he was as skinny as a matchstick.

Four houses on the main street in Kati's village of Plesivec had been designated a ghetto for Jews from Plesivec as well as three or four neighboring villages.

Plesivec was an important stopover for trains going north and south.

When local officials beat the drum in Jelsava and announced that all Jews had to report to the town square at 8:00 in the morning bringing only what they could carry, Willi's mother did not pack one thing practical, saying they'd only be gone for a night, maybe two.

They marched the Jews from Jelsava, about one hundred people, the ten miles to Plesivec and put them in one big house. They gave Willi's family—his mother, sister, grandmother and uncle—one small room.

This is your room, someone said. We unpacked and tried to settle. There was no place to sit but the floor. And there was nothing to do but sit. There were guards outside, Hungarian Gendarmes, making sure we stayed put.

They had not brought enough food, so Willi went through the backyards, avoiding the Gendarmes, until he reached the house where the Jews from Plesivec had been gathered. Willi's mother knew Kati's mother. Perhaps Mrs. Kellner could spare something.

Kati's mother introduced her daughter to Willi. Even though Kati had just turned sixteen, she told herself this was the boy she was going to marry.

Later that day, Kati followed the same backyard route to bring soup to Willi's family.

I was pretty impressed. Kati went over fences and hedges in the backyard and didn't spill one drop of the soup. She's a pretty good athlete.

When Kati delivered the soup, she recognized Willi's sister Lilly; they had met on the train earlier that month coming home from school in Budapest.

Having to leave her boarding school had taken Kati by complete surprise. One day a teacher told her to pack up everything and take the train home. Play dumb. Don't speak to anyone. There were Germans everywhere.

On the train Kati had struck up a conversation with another girl on the train, whispering, "Are you Jewish?" The girl said yes and that her name was Lilly Salcer.

Upon arriving home, Kati's parents explained that Germany's leader, Hitler, absolutely despised Jews.

I had no idea Hitler had already killed millions of Jews. I had never heard of the camps. The first time I would hear of Auschwitz would be months later when the cattle car doors opened.

Kati was told that she couldn't go out and see her old friends, especially Christians, and had to wear a yellow star whenever she left the house.

Within a few weeks, the SS came for her father and grandfather.

The front door burst open and the SS men came in. They said come with us. That was it. My father and grandfather were gone. I never saw them again.

The next day, there were more SS at the door. Kati, her mother, brother and grandmother were escorted into the ghetto with the rest of Plesivec's Jews.

You know where the ghetto started? In the house next door to ours. They led us out one door and into another. I looked out the window at my own home.

In the midst of this turmoil and despair, Kati's mother also worried that her daughter had fallen in love.

Mrs. Kellner didn't think I was good enough for her Kati.

She told Kati to forget Willi; he was not rich enough. It didn't matter that he had millionaire uncles, that his Uncle Alexander was one of the most powerful businessmen in Czechoslovakia. Willi was young, only nineteen, and not yet in a position to support a wife and family.

Like every Jewish mother at that time, my mother believed it was better to fall in love with a doctor or a lawyer. It didn't matter that Willi was quite handsome, a star athlete and smart. My mother didn't think he could take care of me. That's what mattered.

Kati tried to obey and forget about Willi. The last thing she wanted was to further upset her mother. Things were difficult enough. But it was impossible for Kati to stay away from Willi Salcer after she saw how all the girls were after him.

Kati exaggerates. There were not so many girls.
Don't you believe him.

All the girls wanted him. Magda and Eva Fisher. Clara Loebl.

Kati told all of them, "That guy—he's mine."

Magda was Kati's age, her sister Eva a few years younger. Their family had owned a shop that sold fabric. Although there were only seven or eight Jewish families in Plesivec, the Fisher and Kellner families did not mix. Different circles. Kati's parents were more sophisticated. They traveled to Budapest to shop and for the theater and vacationed on the Italian Riviera. But Kati still liked Magda and Eva. Whenever Kati came home from school, they would visit with each other.

Clara Loebl had also liked Willi. Kati always admired Clara. She was tall, thin and very pretty—and did things Kati wouldn't dare. If Kati had worn red nail polish, her mother and grandmother would have thrown her out of the house.

Even though Kati tried to act older and worldlier to impress Willi—styling her hair like a Hollywood movie star or posing with a borrowed cigarette—he could tell she only knew Saturday tea dances and shy kisses. It was obvious Kati had been a bit sheltered—and spoiled. Willi had also gone to school in Budapest, the Industrial and Technical College, so he knew about the girls from Forstner. He couldn't quite figure out Forstner, this dormitory for rich and snobby girls that didn't teach one thing practical. Painting on porcelain. Posture. Playing the piano. What kind of place was this? His sister Lilly went to a school where she excelled in mathematics.

Still, during Willi's one week in Plesivec's ghetto, he visited with Kati everyday.

I liked her and I thought she liked me. Yes, there were many pretty girls, but Kati had spunk.

No, there was no hanky panky. Willi treated me respectfully, like a nice Jewish girl from a nice Jewish family.

When Willi saw Kati for the first time after the War, he could see it in her eyes, wide open, always on alert. He knew that look; they were eyes expecting the worst. Yet Willi couldn't help but notice. Kati had the same smile, a smile that made her entire face light up. She smiled like her mother and grandmother, with the same fine wide mouth and elegant bone structure. Kati's mother and grandmother were—no, Willi corrected himself—had been beautiful women.

Willi thought Kati was still very pretty, but looked to him more like twenty-seven than seventeen. The girl he had met in the ghetto was gone. Here was a woman. Willi knew what Auschwitz did to a girl—it did it to his sister Lilly. If it did not kill you, you grew up fast.

You thought I looked ten years older?

Yes.

I never knew this.

When Kati told Willi that she had come to visit Lilly, he had no reason not to believe her. The girls, Willi knew, had become close friends during their months together in Plesivec's ghetto.

Unfortunately, Willi explained, his sister was away visiting friends in Budapest, but please come in. It was so very good to see Kati—Willi was about to add "alive," but thought better. This was already understood. More than three months since the War had ended, and Willi's engineer-trained mind calculated that less than five percent of the Jews he once knew had come home.

Kati thanked Willi for asking her in. Her green eyes brightened when he complimented her dress, saying it was very pretty.

As I recall, Kati was wearing a green dress and lots of lipstick. A young girl in woman's clothing. She was out to impress me.

What are you talking about? I wore my mother's polka dot dress. You're thinking of another dress later on that you bought me in Budapest. And I wore no lipstick. No makeup. I had no lipstick then. But sure, I was out to impress you.

All week since she had heard that Willi Salcer was alive—and his sister Lilly would be away—Kati had been planning what she'd wear for her surprise visit. She wanted to look extra special for seeing Willi the first time since the ghetto, but didn't have much to choose from. All her clothes were gone, she had no money and had not found the gold and jewelry she knew her parents had buried behind the house. It was a tremendous yard that went on forever, a rose garden and orchard and strawberry field. And even if she had found something, there was nothing to buy in postwar Czechoslovakia. There was barely food for sale, let alone clothing that could catch a young man's eye.

Kati decided on her mother's polka dot dress. She knew she was lucky to have it.

She couldn't believe it when the woman who had cleaned her father's pharmacy showed her the suitcase. Inside were family photographs, medicines, soaps and lotions—and her mother's dress, carefully wrapped and tied with a ribbon. After Kati's family had been taken and their possessions thrown out on the main street of Plesivec, this woman had purposely retrieved sentimental items, an extraordinary gesture for a Christian.

No one wanted photos of Jews. It was considered garbage.

Ilka had been different from the other help—the cook, the maid and the woman who came twice a week to do the laundry. She was a little more educated than most Czech peasants, the fifth or sixth grade.

You had to be a little smarter to clean a pharmacy. You had to know not to mix things up.

The first time she saw Ilka after the War, Kati was standing on the street outside her house, watching the Christians living inside. Kati stood, staring, until Ilka came up and put her arms around her.

"It is you. Kati. Thank God, you're alive."

Kati tried to wrestle her way out Ilka's hug.

I was scared. I didn't know what she wanted. I wasn't used to any act of kindness. It made me suspicious, as if being nice or considerate were some trick to throw me off guard. I couldn't relax and let her hug me. How did I know she wouldn't stick a knife into my back?

Ilka took Kati by the hand, and led her to her own home. She put Kati to bed and showed the suitcase filled with photographs, the polka dot dress, medicines, soaps and lotions.

Kati recognized the white packets of medicine from her father's pharmacy.

The soap and lotions smelled like her mother.

I just can't tell you how Ilka treated me. She put me to bed and wouldn't let me go anywhere. She said I would stay until I got better. I was less than a hundred pounds. Every night she brought me a glass of hot milk and tucked me in.

One of those nights, Kati emptied all of the white packets into her hot milk. She knew it was morphine.

I could never believe that Kati had tried to commit suicide.

You could never believe it?

No.

What did you think?

I thought you made up the suicide to get my sympathy.

I had lost my entire family. Why would I need to make anything up to get sympathy?

I was a young man. I didn't have deep thoughts. I thought you were out to trap me.

After the doctor pumped Kati's stomach, Ilka continued nursing her. When Kati was better she went to the Mayor of Plesivec.

He'd be glad to kick the Christians out, he said. Kati didn't need papers. He knew who she was. He didn't like those people. The Hungarian Gendarmes and German SS put them in. This was Czechoslovakia again! He'd be glad to be rid of them, but if Kati wanted everything back, she would have to find someone who could run the pharmacy. The town needed the pharmacy; it was the only one for miles. And as the house was behind the pharmacy, it was the natural place for people running the business to live.

The large stone house behind her father's pharmacy and grandfather's hardware store had been Kati's home all her life. Her family and grandparents shared the house, but everything inside had been separate, with two distinct households, each with its own kitchens and maids. The families only ate together on holidays.

Here look. I have a photo thanks to Ilka. There's my father's pharmacy and my grandfather's hardware store in front. You see where it says "Bing"? That was my grandfather's name: Joseph Bing. My grandmother was Ida Bing. Not many survivors have photos, you know. I am very lucky.

PHOTO

The only person Kati knew who would be able to run the pharmacy was her father's younger brother Pavel, if he were still alive. Kati's father had put Pavel through college. After graduation he had worked in the pharmacy and lived with Kati and her family. Kati was not close to her father's family. For the most part, they were very poor. But she would go to their hometown, Roznava, to see if she could find Pavel.

My parents were successful business owners and sophisticated, and I wasn't allowed to visit my father's family. They did not match. My father's family was not educated, and their ways more like peasants. When I went there once in a while, I was showered as soon as I got home.

There was no sign of Pavel in Roznava, but Kati did see Gabi Strauss.

When Gabi heard I was in Roznava, he came looking for me. I guess you could say Gabi liked me in a certain way.

I knew I had a competitor in Gabi. I could see he was in love with Kati. He called her Greta Garbo.

Gabi Strauss? He was never your competition. I looked at him like a brother. Gabi thought I looked like Greta Garbo?

Yes, Gabi called you Greta Garbo. He was not my competitor?

Never.

Now she tells me.

Kati and Gabi were talking about who had returned when Gabi mentioned that Willi Salcer and his sister Lilly were alive and living in Jelsava.

You cannot imagine how I felt to hear Willi was alive.

Gabi also told Kati that he had heard Lilly was going to Budapest for the weekend. Perhaps Kati would be interested in accompanying Gabi to Budapest so she could see her old friend Lilly? Oh no, Kati had told him, this weekend would not be good for her.

Kati had other plans.

Willi apologized that he could not offer Kati a proper chair, but there were none. There was little furniture in the Weisz family home; the scavengers had taken everything, even the curtains.

The Weisz house was the largest in Jelsava. It was my mother's family home. Before they were taken, my uncles and grandmother lived there. Lilly or I had never lived there until after the War.

Kati said something about maybe it being time for her to go to the station so she could catch the train home to Plesivec. When Willi told her there was no train back until the morning, Kati wondered what she would do. Willi said not to worry; she was welcome to spend the night. He also confessed that he was a little hungry and was about to head down the hill to Jelsava's only restaurant when Kati knocked. Was she hungry? Would she care to join him?

In the restaurant, Kati didn't miss that the waitress was awfully familiar with Willi and called him by his childhood nickname, "Pubi."

It was her way of letting me know that she knew Willi. I wasn't stupid.

No, she was just trying to embarrass me.

And when she asked Willi about Etta, I realized I must have some competition.

Etta was never your competition.

Etta Varga was never my competition?

No.

Now he tells me.

Etta Varga was considered the beauty queen of Jelsava—and Willi's girlfriend. She'd been writing love letters to Willi about spending their lives together, but Willi figured he was only twenty one years old, too young to settle. And, after all, he had just lost a year.

Willi asked Kati about the other girls he had met while he was in the ghetto in Plesivec. Clara Loebl. The Fisher sisters.

I didn't go into it. I simply said Eva Fisher didn't make it.

Kati didn't tell Willi how after six weeks in Auschwitz she and Magda and Eva had been deemed surplus and put on a line for the gas chamber. When a guard laughed and told the girls they were about to take the shower of their lives, they still didn't believe it. Guards were always saying horrible, unbelievable things to frighten you, so why believe them now?

If you made the mistake of believing everything they said, you would only go crazy.

Standing in the line for the gas, Kati could hear what was going on inside the building. She had never heard such sounds; it was impossible for her to believe people could make such sounds, that this was screaming.

They had been taking girls into the showers in groups of ten. When there were a few girls ahead of me, air raid sirens sounded and everything stopped. Planes flew overhead. When all was clear, they counted maybe a hundred girls and told us to turn around. They marched us to a train. They didn't tell us where we were going. For all we knew, they had run out of killing gas and were going to ride us around until we were dead. We were on the train for two or three days before we arrived at a labor camp in Germany. From this labor camp, they would send us to work in a munitions factory.

Underground in the munitions factory, Kati and the Fisher sisters lifted heavy buckets and poured a stinking muddy yellowish green liquid into bombs. There were no gloves or masks for the Jewish women and girls; only the male Polish political prisoners got protection. All day long the girls sucked in the fumes that seared the hair in their noses, burned their lungs, yellowed their eyes and skin—and eventually killed Eva Fisher.

Kati had begged a guard to please let them bury Eva. She promised they would be quiet. No one would know. The guard told Kati to leave Eva in the bunkhouse and cover her with a blanket before they went to work, and she would see.

That night, Magda and I scratched the earth with our bare hands to dig a proper grave. There was nothing else we could do. We couldn't bear the thought of Eva going into an oven at Auschwitz.

Clara Loebl, Kati thought. Clara also liked Willi when they were in the ghetto. Clara was the tall and pretty one. Kati and Clara had known each other all their lives. She and Clara had attended the same one-room elementary school.

Clara and her mother were with Kati in Auschwitz. Same barracks.

It was unusual to have your mother, but maybe Clara's mother had not been sent to the left because she listened to the Polish prisoners when she stepped off the wagon.

"Walk straight, look like you can work—and do not hold your child's hand. Do not hold your child's hand."

Of course when Kati's mother had heard this, she held onto Kati's brother's hand even tighter. And Kati's grandmother clutched her with all her might.

It was Clara's mother who had saved Kati after she collapsed from a terrible diarrhea. For days Kati had been sick, so weak that every time she had to stand in line to be counted—at least two or three times a day, in the hot sun for hours—Mrs. Loebl

would position herself behind Kati and hold her up, only letting go as a guard passed, "Kati. Stand. Now."

Then one day Kati couldn't find the strength to stand. After she fainted, she woke up in a room, stacked in a pile of dead to be carted to the crematorium.

It was so dark and quiet in that room, unbelievably quiet. Then I heard a whisper. Kati. Kati. Are you here? Kati, Kati, where are you? I started crying. Mrs. Loebl pulled me from the pile and carried me back into the barracks. The next morning when I awoke, my fever was gone and no more diarrhea. I was very sad to learn that Mrs. Loebl didn't make it out of Auschwitz. And no, I can't tell you her first name. Growing up, she was always Mrs. Loebl to me. This woman saved my life and I don't even know her full name.

Kati did not tell Willi all this when he asked about the girls from the ghetto. Maybe by this time she knew everyone had a terrible story, and for at least one moment, she wanted to feel nice feelings. After a year of emotions so brutal they didn't even have names, Kati wanted to feel something nice again.

Emotions that don't even have names? What is the feeling a girl experiences when she is separated from her family, stripped naked and shaven, then finally when she's lying on a cold floor, the Kapo comes in for one last bedtime taunt.

You want to have a good night's sleep? Look out the window little girls. You see that grey smoke? That's your father, mother, brother, sister. You want to have a good night's sleep? Look at the smoke and say goodnight to your family.

Goodnight Daddy. Goodnight Mommy.

What to call this? How to give this a name? There are certain things words can never meet.

Now for the first time in a long time Kati was experiencing a nice feeling she could put a name to.

It was called love.

And young love can make a young girl do impetuous things. Like show up at a young man's house and say she's there to see his sister when she knows full well the sister is away. And on a day when she knows there's no train back and he'll have to invite her to stay.

Kati knew Willi would ask her to stay over.

She also knew he'd treat her respectfully, like a nice Jewish girl from a nice Jewish family

Even with everyone gone, it still mattered.

What is Today?
July 1944

In Auschwitz, there was a woman in Kati's barracks who everyday would announce the day of the week and the date. "Today is Friday. It is July 28, 1944."

Then one morning she could not remember. She cried, "Please, do you know what day it is? Do you know the date?"

No one answered. Perhaps someone knew, but no one cared anymore.

That Director Spielberg
1994

These days, it seemed to Willi that not only Jews were interested. Ever since that director Spielberg's movie, something he and Kati had tried to never talk about seemed to be everywhere. Newspapers. Magazines. Television. It was even a topic of dinner conversation on a cruise vacation.

They were at a table for ten in the ship's dining room when the nice lady from Milwaukee said even though she was not herself Jewish, and there weren't many Jewish people back home, she had liked every Jewish person she had ever known.

Kati said, "How nice," while Willi joked that it was a good thing this woman liked Jews considering 85% of the people who went on these cruises were Jewish.

Oh Willi, why do you say such things?

It's true, isn't it?

Schindler's List, the nice lady wondered. Had anyone seen it? Everyone who had—which seemed to be everyone at the table except Kati and Willi—agreed it was powerful and extraordinary. So different from other works on the subject, mostly foreign films with English subtitles. Schindler's List not only speaks to the American audience, but also helps a person really understand what the Holocaust must have been like.

Oh no, Kati thought. No way could anyone understand what it had been like through a movie, especially a movie made by a director best known for a work about an extraterrestrial. What could this director Spielberg possibly do with the Holocaust? Send the girls chosen for Mengele's' medical experiments up on an alien spaceship with ET? No, Mr. Spielberg, this wasn't science fiction. It happened. This wasn't a movie where the girl would come back with vague memories and be interviewed by newspapers and television. If any of those girls came back, they didn't speak at all.

Kati didn't mean to say anything. The words fell from her mouth.

"Nothing, no book, no movie, can depict what it was like in Auschwitz."

Quite sincerely, the nice lady from Milwaukee asked Kati from across the dining room table, "What was it like in Auschwitz?"

What was it like in Auschwitz?

Even if Kati were predisposed to talk about it in front of this table of strangers, what could she possibly say? Put starvation in terms the nice lady could understand and explain that this was not like her diet, the hardship of eating ounces of fish and carrot sticks so she could wear a nicer bathing suit in the summer. Maybe Kati should ask the lady what is her worst nightmare, than multiply this by a million. This still wasn't Auschwitz.

Too bad the nice lady couldn't see inside the back of Kati's head; maybe then she would begin to understand what it was like in Auschwitz. It's always in Kati's head, like a movie playing again and again without intermission. What was it like in Auschwitz? There's no past tense here. Look in my head and you will see. Auschwitz never ends.

The best I can do is muffle the images and sounds by living my life. I wish I had known how to do this when I was seventeen. Then, I tried to drown it out one summer night with five packets of morphine in a glass of warm milk. I didn't know any other way.

What was it like in Auschwitz? It was standing in the barracks when they were making selections for Mengele's' medical experiments and hoping they wouldn't pick you. It was feeling relief when they picked someone else. This was Auschwitz. This is what it did to people. Do you know a worse nightmare?

Kati looked kindly at the nice lady.

"I tell you what. We are having such a nice evening. How about we don't ruin it with such talk?"

After this dinner, Willi wondered if maybe they shouldn't summarily dismiss Schindler's List. Maybe there was something about this movie. Maybe they should go see it.

"Willi, if you want to see Schindler's List, that's fine by me. I'm not going."

I said I wasn't going and then I went to see Schindler's List twice. The first time I cried, the second time I listened—to every word.

When the little girl shouted, "Goodbye, Jews!" Kati heard the townspeople she had known all her life.

"Finally, you Jews get what you deserve," the boy who had been a childhood playmate sneered when he picked Kati up on her very own bicycle to take her in for interrogation.

"Ha! Good for you, Jews!" Kati heard from farmers so poor they'd pay her pharmacist father with a bottle of milk when they didn't have money for medicine. Ladislav Kellner would say, "Don't worry."

Goodbye, Jews.

When Willi saw Schindler's List, he remembered the rocks thrown as he and his family were marched the ten miles from Jelsava to the ghetto in Plesivec. Willi could stand the pelting more for himself than his mother and grandmother and sister and Uncle Eugene. What sort of people throw rocks at old women or a man like his Uncle, so crippled he could only hold his head tilted to one side, resting on a shoulder. Eugene could not even see the rocks coming, and Willi could not warn him.

When the Jews had gathered in Jelsava's town square that morning, Willi's mother had warned her son not to resist in any way. Listen. Obey. Do exactly what they say, and everything will be okay. Did Willi understand that his mother could not bear it if anything happened to him? It would be the end of her.

Willi understood.

That director Spielberg, Kati had to admit, had touched upon something. Suddenly she and Willi were talking about what they had never talked about. Then one day they stopped. Kati was having nightmares. Talking about it was simply too painful. So she and Willi stopped talking about it, and Kati tried not to think about it, putting it away in the back of her head.

Kati, Retribution, and the SS Man
1945

He was a little man
A big nose like a beak
The SS man at the Lichtenau labor camp
Perfect for the job
He derived great pleasure from beating women and girls
I saw how his face lit up when he was cruel
His picking up a stick and hitting someone over the head
Kicking a girl in the crotch with his boots
Was nothing
He'd hit or kick without warning, reason or mercy
"You don't even bleed blood"
We chanced upon him
A few days after we started walking home towards Czechoslovakia
A group of Jewish girls from the Lichtenau labor camp
He was in a German village
Teeming with refugees and German soldiers
Everyone was running and hiding
This way and that way
The soldiers would see the survivors
The survivors would see the soldiers
Everyone would say
"Okay, we don't see you"
"You don't see us"
That's how it went
Until the tough older girl from our group
A girl I admired
For her toughness
Spotted the SS man
Two young men
Polish political prisoners from the Lichtenau labor camp
Also saw the SS man
"Let's catch him"
"Let's hang him"
They said
I went with the older girl and another girl from our group
Along with the two young Polish men
We went looking for the SS man
He wasn't hard to find
He was walking on a street in the village
We surrounded him from different directions
The young men were the ones who physically grabbed him
No one stopped them
What was surprising was how weak the SS man suddenly appeared
One of the guys had rope
I don't remember where the rope came from
The young men dragged the SS man from the village to a suitable tree
When the noose was around his neck, I joined in
I held the rope

My hands trembled
I pulled with everyone
I pulled and pulled until he was yanked dead
What did I feel?
Not the least bit of pity. Not a touch of remorse. No sympathy
For this man, all I felt was hatred
I wanted him dead
I wanted revenge
Afterwards
We rejoined our group
No one mentioned the SS man
We held hands and continued walking home towards Czechoslovakia
We walked through the woods at night
It was here I began to see the SS man's dying face
All the time
My hands trembled
I was terrified
Afraid I had become a monster
Like him
You say his name was SS Obercharfuhrer Ernst Zorbach?
No, I never knew his name.

You Have No Experience
1961

"Willi you go out into life. The children go to school. Now they are away in summer camp. Me, I am a nobody, a useless nothing housewife."

After she said it, Kati waited for Willi to react the same way he had in Israel when she told him she would like to open a knitting store. No wife of his was going to work if he could support his family. You have the children to take care of. The house.

He surprised her.

"Kati, maybe this is a good idea. Maybe you should go out and learn something in computers. That is a new field. Maybe you can take a course and get a nice position while the children are in school. I think there's a big future in computers."

Willi checked into it and in the fall of 1961, Kati enrolled in a course at IBM.

Among the one hundred and twenty people taking the course, Kati was the only one who got a ninety-nine.

I don't remember anything I had learned, but I was good at it.

I was so proud of Kati for her 99 that I put her certificate away in a special place and saved it. See, I still have it.

PHOTO

Kati's IBM Certificate

With her certificate in hand, Kati started her job search. Every single day for weeks she went to three or four places looking. The answer was always the same.

"Sorry, but you have no experience."

Her last interview was on Wall Street.

A young man in his twenties with a crew cut and a clean white shirt summoned the thirty-four year old Kati into his office.

"You are applying for the secretarial position?"

"Yes."

'What are your qualifications?"

"I have the certificate from IBM. I was top in my class. I speak, read and write five languages. When I studied in Budapest..."

"Budapest. Is that where your accent is from?"

"No, I am Czech. But when I was in school in Budapest I took a course in—what do you call it when you write quick—yes, that's it, shorthand. I was very good at this."

"How long ago did you take shorthand?"

"1944."

"Sixteen years ago?"

Kati corrected him. "Seventeen."

"And your work experience?"

"In Israel I had worked as a maid and a waitress. I am a very good worker."

"What about office experience?"

"I have none, but I learn quickly."

"We're looking for someone with experience."

"I tell you what. I really want this job. If you give me this job I will work at a low salary. What do you have to lose if you try me?"

"I'm sorry, but we're looking for someone with experience."

Kati looked at this young man, furious with herself that she had begged him.

"You ask about experience? I have none. Nothing. Nobody starts with experience. You started with no experience. How much experience did you have?"

"I am not the one applying for a job."

"You know what you can do with your experience? You can drop dead with your experience."

You know, with all that I had been through in life, among the most emotionally trying was interviewing for work in America. You put your best foot forward but before you're given a chance to speak people decide this or that about you—not enough experience or too old—then treat you like garbage.

Kati was not sorry that she had told the young man off; her only regret was that she had not asked to use the bathroom before she left the building.

I needed to pee so badly that I had tears in my eyes.

She remembered that in the subway there were sometimes public toilets. What she didn't know is that she would need ten cents, and she didn't have a dime.

Kati stood outside the stalls. When a woman came out Kati politely asked her.

"Please leave it open because I don't have ten cents and I am desperate."

The woman smirked and slammed the door.

All I could think was why did she do this to me? Because I am white and she is black? I got so angry that I peed in my pants. I didn't know what to do. Here I am, Mrs. Salcer, a nice lady, and I peed in my pants. It was winter and very cold outside, and by the time I got home my panties were like ice cubes. I felt absolutely defeated.

When Kati saw Willi later that day, she was so upset she told him, "No more job hunting."

He didn't like hearing that she was giving up, but before he could say anything, Kati added with a smile, "No more job hunting—at least not without a pocketful of dimes."

A few days after this Wall Street interview, Kati visited Etka Fashions, a high-end boutique on 58th Street across from the Plaza Hotel.

It was a hotsy totsy store owned by a German Jewish couple that sold handmade knitted suits—eight hundred dollar suits—to very wealthy women, like Mrs. Kennedy.

In one of her best knitted outfits, Kati went into Etka and in her perfect Viennese German explained how she had made her dress herself and how she was very good at not only knitting and crocheting, but designing. She told the owners she was not desperate for a job but was looking for something that would get her out of the house while her children were in school, something where she could experience America.

I had learned from my Wall Street interviews that in America you never tell people you really want a job when you want a job.

The owners asked Kati if she could return the next day with more things she had designed and made. When they saw what she could do, they hired her on the spot.

Pretty Good Knitter
1937

In Plesivec's one-room elementary school, the teacher tells nine-year-old Kati that she has to make a decision. In addition to her regular schoolwork, girls have to learn cooking, sewing or knitting. Kati can choose.

Kati isn't too keen on cooking or sewing, so okay she tells the teacher, she will try knitting. Don't worry, the teacher tells her, it may look difficult but I will help you. What would Kati like to make? Socks? Mittens? A nice warm hat? Oh no. Kati would like to knit her mother a jacket and a skirt. Her mother is a beautiful woman who wears beautiful clothes.

In the evenings when her parents have company for coffee and cake on the back stone terrace her mother is always so beautifully dressed. Before the company comes, she showers and fixes her hair special. She wears lipstick and smells better than the rose garden around the terrace.

On these occasions, Kati and her brother come outside and say hello to the guests in their best Viennese German—the language used in good company— before their Fraulein nanny says it's time to leave the adults alone.

Dressed in her navy blue jacket and skirt, Ilona Kellner exclaims, "Look at the beautiful outfit my daughter Katarina has made for me! Have you ever seen such a beautiful dress?"

Then Kati sees the jacket and skirt are not just for company on the terrace when her mother tells the maid to make sure she packs this very special outfit.

"Of course I'm taking it with me to the Riviera," she tells Kati as the maid carefully folds it into Ilona's suitcase, "It's the most beautiful dress I own."

I don't know if my mother actually wore it, but she always took it with her. Maybe it's because of her encouragement that I continued knitting. These days I can buy anything I want, but almost everything I wear I make myself, knit or crochet. Not to sound conceited, but I'm pretty good knitter. It's amazing what a little confidence can do for you. You don't mind if I knit while we speak? It seems I am always knitting. It relaxes me.

Good and Proud Jew
1894-1945

In the two-room house in Tornalja, Willi's parents argue about money, all the time. There's not much Willi can do to escape the fighting; unless he has to go to school or temple, he's not allowed outside. His mother Irena is afraid he might hurt himself. *Willi you are weak. You need to be taken care of.*

Willi's father Lajos moved the family to this *dump of a house where no decent family could possibly live* after the Salcer farming business went bankrupt in 1928. The Salcer family had been significant landowners when it was rare for Jews to be landowners in Czechoslovakia, but Lajos' try at modernization failed. His wife was furious that he was so stupid to have lost everything. *What kind of fool buys fancy agricultural machinery and equipment when they can't get spare parts or anyone to fix it!*

Willi was four years old when the family moved to Tornalja, a Slovakian city of five thousand, made up of mostly ethnic Hungarians, most of whom it seemed hated Jews. When Willi was seven or eight and allowed to walk alone to school, people would often point out his pious sideburns. *Dirty little Jew boy.* Sometimes it was more than insults and remarks with bands of boys chasing Willi down and beating him up. *Willi, what happened to your clothes! They are ruined! I told you not to play outside.*

No, he never told his mother why his clothes were torn and muddied.

Joining Betar, the Zionist youth organization, made life a little more pleasant for Willi. He liked wearing his Betar uniform with its blue beret; it made him feel important. The meetings were fun, and Willi liked learning about Jewish heroes. Imagine, there were brave Jews not afraid to fight, and Willi Salcer was descended from Jewish heroes like David—and Lajos Salcer.

Yes, Lajos Salcer.

One day Willi's own father became a hero. Over and over, people would tell Willi the story, and every time they told it, it was as if it were a great victory. *In his delivery wagon, your father came face to face with a carriage driven by a man known to be a dangerous Jew hater. It was on one of those streets so narrow that only one could pass at a time. Your father told the man to go back. The man told your father to go back. People came out and yelled for the Jew to move. "Stab him with your knife," they cried. Your father stared at the man and would not move. Finally, the other man went back. Willi, your father is a good and proud Jew!*

This triumph, however, did not stop Willi's mother from berating her husband for not providing better for the family. She was a Weisz. She grew up in the grandest house in Jelsava—a house that had indoor plumbing and electricity when most people did not know such things existed. Now she was a poor woman. *Thanks to a worthless husband.*

To better fulfill family expectations, Lajos tried various business ventures. Once during Christmas he exported trees from Slovakia to Hungary. *You never got paid for the trees!* Finally to make money, Lajos would transport alcohol that had been produced illegally. When he was thrown into jail for bootlegging, Alexander Weisz came to Tornalja with a lawyer. Alexander paid thousands to have his brother-in-law Lajos released.

That was the end of the marriage. Alexander took Willi's mother and sister Lilly back to Jelsava. Willi stayed in Tornalja, going to live with his father's family in a house across the street from their small grocery. It was a neglected home. Even the beds were broken. In this grocery, liquor was also served. It was very simple; mostly a place where people got drunk, and the bouncer was Willi's father.

After his mother left, ten-year-old Willi could go outside all he wanted. Soon he tired of running and hiding when the boys came after him. When a boy on the soccer field called him a dirty Jew, Willi beat him up. The next time he played, this boy and his friends beat Willi up. Willi was afraid, but he went back, and played.

Lilly was nine and Willi eleven when she came to visit Tornalja. When Willi chanced upon her outside, cornered by a much bigger and older boy telling the little Jew girl to lift her skirt, Willi was not afraid to chase the boy down.

Willi rarely saw his mother when he lived with his father in Tornalja. At most it was a quick encounter at the train station when she dropped off or picked up Lilly. *Willi you are filthy. Look at your fingernails*! Willi didn't tell his mother that his father had noticed his nails needed clipping while they were waiting for her train and all Lajos had was a knife. It was the best his father could do. *Why are your hands all bloody!*

Willi had been with his father for almost two years when he was sent to live with his mother and sister. He liked it in Jelsava. It was the most beautiful place he had ever seen with nice children and many places to play, and no Jew haters, as far as Willi could tell. When he had to take an exam and told the teacher he couldn't write on the Sabbath, she took Willi outside and read the questions to him and he told her the answers. Willi did so well in school that he became the top student. His only problem was Uncle Alexander.

If Alexander spoke to Willi at all, it was to tell the boy he was lazy, someone who would never amount to anything. *What else can anyone expect? You are a Salcer. Not a Weisz. That is your behavior.*

There was no complaining about Uncle Alexander to his mother. She greatly admired her brother and thought he could do no wrong. She would often tell Willi the story of how Alexander became the head of the family after their father died in 1918. *Alexander was only seventeen when he took charge of the family lumber business. Imagine, only seventeen and he bought up forests in other countries, made the business international and the family millions. Alexander is one of the most successful, if not the most successful, businessmen in all of Czechoslovakia.*

Yes, this was true, Uncle Eugene would tell Willi, but his older brother Alexander not only ran the family business, but the family. *He is the family dictator.* Here was Irena, a cultured woman and non-practicing Jew, married off to a very religious man with no sophistication. This was a mismatch orchestrated by Alexander. *There was some urgency. Your mother was almost thirty, and there were rumors about her and an Army officer. Alexander probably thought it was a good match because the Salcers had land. Your mother had to obey and marry your father. She had no choice. Alexander was the head of the family; what he said went.*

In 1938, word came that Lajos had opened a small hotel in Hnusta, a small city eighty miles away. Willi did not want to leave Jelsava, but he was sent to live with his father.

Willi was in the hotel dining room when Lajos folded his cards and called over to his boy.

"What are we going to do with you?"

"I was thinking I would like to become a doctor."

There was a problem. Before medical school, Willi would have to attend a gymnasium. The closest was in Rimavska Sobota, two and a half hours by train. To be accepted, Willi would have to take tests, and there were two subjects he had never studied: Latin and German.

Lajos promised his son if he wanted to become a doctor, he would find a way. He hired tutors and for two months Willi studied Latin and German in the corner of the hotel restaurant. Willi was accepted, and except for Saturdays when he stayed over, traveled by train to and from the gymnasium every day.

Unfortunately, a year later, Willi's studies were interrupted when Hitler cut up Czechoslovakia and made Slovakia a separate state with a government headed by an extreme anti-Semite. There was a mobilization, and Lajos' hotel was taken over by the army. No one could say what would happen tomorrow. Save your life. There was no

protection. No law and order. No need to get an indictment of any kind. They just took Jews.

One night Lajos told his sister Ibolya and Willi to put on their coats and calmly walk out the front door of the hotel. They were going to leave everything. Slovakia was too dangerous for Jews, and with the borders now changed, the rest of the family was now in Hungary and Lajos didn't want to be cut out of the family.

They left the hotel and walked all night to the Hungarian border. When they reached Hungary, Lajos and Ibolya took the train to Tornalja and Willi was sent to his mother in Jelsava. Soon after, Ibolya would leave for Palestine with her brother Erno, sister Szeren and their spouses. They decided they weren't going to stick around to see if things got better. Lajos decided not to go with them to Palestine. He didn't want to leave his children behind.

It was in the winter of 1945, when Willi was among a group of Labor Battalion Jews force-marched to the Austrian border town of Sopron, that he learned of his father's death.

He was told Lajos Salcer had also been taken into the Labor Battalion, this special division of Hungary's army that took able-bodied Jewish men from nineteen years of age onwards. Most of these men were sent to the Russian front to dig trenches, clear minefields, build bridges—the dangerous, dirty work. They did it without uniforms, boots or weapons, wearing their own tattered clothes and shoes. Many died from exposure and illness.

The details were not clear, but it appeared Lajos Salcer had died in Sopron after contracting some sort of illness. Willi was shocked; he did not think anything could kill his father. He was the strongest man Willi had ever known.

Lajos Salcer was 51 years old.

Willi knew his father wasn't an intellectual and had no mind for business. But he was a good and proud Jew.

Willi was a Salcer. Not a Weisz.

He Asked You Nicely
1977

Ronnie told you about that fight? Yes, what he said is correct. That happened when he was about two years out of college, living on his own in California. Kati and I went to visit. Ronnie and I love ice hockey—I played as a boy and every winter I would freeze the Forest Hills swimming pool so he could skate. On that particular visit, he took me to a Kings game at the Los Angeles Forum.

He was down by the glass watching a friend play. I was sitting in the stands. There was a man smoking a cigar in front of me. Next to this man was another man who had repeatedly asked in a nice manner for the man to please stop smoking. The man with the cigar not only ignored him, but also started blowing smoke in his face.

Although both men were strangers to me, I could not sit there and watch this. I told the man with the cigar that this man had asked you in a nice way to stop smoking. Still, the man wouldn't stop. So I put the cigar out for him.

Ronnie came running up. I could see he was upset that I had been in a fight. I know Ronnie remembers this and other incidents, like the airport. I know these types of incidents upset him. When Ronnie was about ten, we were standing on line at LaGuardia when a big burly guy cut in. Ronnie was afraid I would say something. Of course, I did. I went up to the man and said something like, "Hey buddy, get to the end of the line." The man stared at me, then relented.

Ronnie saw many instances like this when he was growing up. Most of the times the other guy backed down, but not always. I knew it upset Ronnie, but I couldn't stand by and watch someone being taken advantage of or bullied. I've never been able to quite explain this to Ronnie, how I was not able to sit by and do nothing. I never talked about feelings with Ronnie; where I grew up, men simply didn't do this. In such matters, Ronnie was always much closer with his mother.

After Ronnie started college, he did try to talk to me about certain feelings. He came into my study, told me he was taking a psychology course and proceeded to lecture me on the psychology of relaxing. He told me I needed to relax. I agreed and told him I would try.

Sometimes Ronnie would try to talk to me about what happened during the War. I would always be vague in answering. I remember once he got a little frustrated with me. He suddenly said, "Let it go. Let it go," before he left the room.

Ronnie says I react with an intensity that hasn't changed to this day? I know he wishes I could relax, but I'm not as intense as when I was younger.

No, I had never told Ronnie that I had been in Mauthausen, so I'm not surprised he told you that he had never heard of Mauthausen.

Can You Imagine?
March 1944

It went like clockwork, only better. To implement the Final Solution, SS Colonel Adolf Eichmann and two hundred of his men went into Hungary on March 19, 1944. On April 7, 1944, the Hungarian Council of Ministers issued Ordinance No. 6161/1944, calling for all Jews living outside of Budapest to be placed into camps and ghettos.

Without warning, Jewish men—especially the heads of households—were taken from their homes at gunpoint and thrown into makeshift camps. It was believed there would be less resistance if they took these men first, and by complete surprise.

The remaining Jews—women, children, the elderly and disabled, as well as young men like Willi—were soon rounded up and crowded into areas designated as ghettos, holding areas before transport to Auschwitz. When these Jews were taken from their homes, local populations, former friends and neighbors, plundered Jewish property in a complete frenzy. No one stopped them. Hitler considered it Hungary's reward for cooperating.

Eichmann had anticipated problems, but his plan had gone better than he had ever expected. Within months, all of Hungary outside of Budapest was Judenrein or free of Jews. Not only Hungarian Fascists, but also most of the country—including some Jews—helped with the purge.

> *I know from my experience in Jelsava that people not only obeyed the murderers, but tried to be extra helpful. Can you imagine? They went out of their way to be helpful. People you may have known all your life and thought were your friends. Eichmann went to Hungary with only a couple of hundred SS. Without help, he could not have swept the entire country except for Budapest clean of Jews. What are the figures? Half a million in three, four months? The Nazis could not have done this without help, and not only from the Hungarian Gendarmes. Everyday people pointed out Jews. What else could they do, they would say. You tell me, who were the sheep?*

Years later at his trial in Israel, Eichmann would ask, "Why me? Everyone killed the Jews."

Waking Up in Willi's House
August 1945

In the morning Kati awoke screaming, as usual. There was no escaping her ghosts, even in Willi's house in Jelsava. When Willi came in to see if Kati were okay, she told him it had only been a nightmare. Thinking Kati might be cold, he covered her with a blanket, saying he was lucky; he never remembered his dreams. What Kati did not know was that he kicked and fought, battled his demons, all night long.

Kati was sorry she had awakened Willi. It was still very early, hours before dawn. Probably best if they both tried to get some sleep. She would be fine. Really. She didn't tell Willi this was how she woke every morning: screaming. She would scream herself awake then quietly wait for the sunlight to scatter her devils.

When Kati went to the window after dawn, she took comfort in seeing Willi. He was outside, in front of the house, talking to a young man he called Sam.

Two or three years younger, Sam Rosener liked to accompany the twenty-one year old Willi wherever he went.

Maybe Sam stuck to me a little more than normal because he had no one else with his family gone. What is the word for it? Yes, you could say Sam was my sidekick. He followed me everywhere. He was a nice kid.

Kati couldn't help but notice the pretty envelope on the windowsill. Such fine paper, as fine as the best paper her grandfather had sold in his hardware store. Kati's hand traced the delicate script.

Wait.

Were those really small hearts that dotted Willi's name?

She told herself it was wrong, but could not resist peeking inside like any seventeen-year-old girl in love.

The letter was from Etta Varga; the girl the waitress in Jelsava's only restaurant had teased Willi about the night before. The letter told Kati that she had been right in thinking Etta was her competition.

Can you believe this? Kati read my love letter.

What did you expect leaving it half opened on the windowsill of the room where I had slept?

Kati didn't know what to do when she read the words Etta had written to her *dearest* Willi.

"Last night I had a dream that I came to you in a long white gown, and you were waiting for me in a dark suit."

When I read the letter and realized Etta wanted to marry Willi, I became extremely jealous and didn't know what to do. I had no one to ask. An older friend. A mother. I had no one to turn to; no one to tell me that getting jealous after discovering another girl wanted the boy you loved was completely normal.

How to handle this jealousy? Eyes straight ahead, do exactly what you're told, think about the good food you will eat again one day—but Kati soon discovered that the defenses she had mastered in Auschwitz were useless in surviving everyday heartbreak. She couldn't stand that Etta wanted to marry Willi; she wished Etta would disappear.

When I thought of Etta, I didn't feel like such a nice Jewish girl.

Kati told herself to stop this crazy thinking. She would never do anything to Etta. She was not a monster. She hadn't turned into an animal. She was still the same Kati, even after everything.

Talk to yourself and things will be better. Wash your face. Comb your hair. Put on your polka dot dress. Make yourself pretty for Willi.

That is what Kati did whenever she had crazy thoughts. She talked to herself.

I still do. After the camps I became my own psychiatrist. Whenever I'd have crazy thoughts, I'd talk to myself, tell myself what I had to do. And I did a lot of talking because I had a lot of crazy thoughts. Luckily, it happened less and less over the years.

Outside, Willi raised his voice to his friend Sam, saying he had threatened to beat the guy up, and still that guy doesn't stop. What can Willi do? He cannot kill him.

Sam, speaking like a younger boy with an older boy as a hero, asked Willi for assurance. You won't let that guy push you around, will you Willi? No one can push Willi Salcer around, can they? He can't make you stop seeing Etta, can he Willi?

Willi said that no one could push him around, and asked Sam to find out if the Secretary planned to write any more articles.

Etta Varga had many admirers in Jelsava, including this local Secretary of the Communist party.

Etta had very beautiful hair.

What do you mean she had very beautiful hair?

She had beautiful hair. That's all.

When Etta started bringing home-cooked meals to Willi after he had returned that summer, it drove the Secretary a little crazy. He had not only lost out to another man, but to a Jew. The Secretary started writing disparaging articles in the local paper about the handful of Jews returning to Jelsava. He hadn't picked on Willi specifically, but the articles so infuriated Willi that he had told Sam to find out what time the Secretary left his office in the evening.

One night Willi confronted him with every intention of beating him up.

The Secretary crumbled.

He got down on his knees and begged me not to hit him. He promised he would never write another article, just please don't hit him. I could not hit a man on his knees who would not resist, so I walked away.

After a few weeks there was another article and the Jews in Jelsava put pressure on Willi.

"Don't provoke this man."

"He's a power here. He can make trouble."

"Willi, give up the shiksa."

Willi refused.

I could not stop seeing Etta for the wrong reason.

Willi Salcer was a proud Jew, like his father. He would not run from a fight, like his father. Appeasing Jew haters had never been in his background, and he wasn't going to start now, especially with no one aiming a gun at his head. The idea of Willi Salcer letting some sniveling local Secretary of the Communist Party bully him into not seeing a girl was unthinkable.

I was not afraid of this Secretary. What could he do? Kill me?

It was while Willi prepared breakfast for Kati that she noticed how he rubbed his legs.

"You have the same swelling?"

"This also happens to you?"

Willi could stand it for himself, but it was somehow harder to imagine that an innocent girl like Kati had been in a similar place. Were her legs also swollen from starvation?

It was my theory that it was the lack of food that caused the swelling. My legs would swell after they tried to starve me to death in Mauthausen.

In March of 1945, Willi Salcer was among a group of Hungarian Labor Battalion Jews forced to build the Southern Ramparts, a line of fortification against the approaching Russian Army along the Austrian-Hungarian border. Willi dug trenches that were supposed to stop the oncoming tanks.

A joke if it were not funny.

When the trenches were completed, the Jews were marched to Mauthausen. It was bitter cold, the tail end of the worst winter to hit Europe in years. Many collapsed and died on the march. Luckily, Willi had a blanket.

That's what saved me, kept me warm. Mrs. Demeter's blanket.

When Willi had been told he was to be taken from Plesivec's ghetto, his mother cried and assured him. "It will only be for a few days."

"You don't have a blanket," Dr. Demeter's wife said to Willi.

Mrs. Demeter was right. Willi's mother had not packed one thing practical and Willi would need a blanket.

"My son will be okay. He will only be away for a night, maybe two."

I will always remember this. I was among a group of men to be taken and I didn't have a blanket. And there was Dr. Demeter's wife, Mrs. Demeter, a family friend. Mrs. Demeter brought me a blanket. "Here is one. I have it for you." I had this blanket all through Hungary, through the death marches, all the camps. It was a wool blanket. That's what I slept on. That's what I covered myself with. This Bordeaux colored blanket. Dark red. Maroon. That's it. Maroon. I had it until the very end. I don't like to think what could have happened to me without that blanket.

In the Austrian hellhole that was Mauthausen, all pretense of being sent to work had been dropped. Unlike Auschwitz, there was no double-talk about showers. Indeed, the quick gas of Auschwitz was considered a blessing next to the slow death of Mauthausen. Probably why Auschwitz inmates were sometimes threatened with being sent to Mauthausen, this greater punishment.

With whips and dogs the SS men drove Willi and his group past the searchlights and through the wooden gates. They put them in large tents with floors of mud, wet matted straw swarming with lice and rats, and soaked with urine and feces. Once inside, the men were too weak or scared to go to the latrine. The Ukrainian guards enjoyed shooting at Jews. Target practice.

In the tent, Willi lay side by side with the dead.

Yes, there were men who used the dead as pillows. After a while, you almost forgot the dead had once been people.

Everyday Willi had crawled out of the tent for his daily ration: a bowl of boiled grass and leaves, a diet designed to kill in five or six weeks.

I met up with old schoolmates and friends in Mauthausen, but we didn't speak to each other. We just looked into the air. We never laughed. We never cried. We were walking skeletons. People were dying all around, but nobody cared about anything or anyone.

Did Kati know this starvation?

Yes, she did. In Auschwitz she had taken her ten sips of soup a day from the large red bowl teeming with rotten potato skins and rat hair—taking more would have meant a slam in the back of the head. When she was sent to the labor camp in Lichtenau, they fed her a little better; they had to if they wanted to get a day's work out of the girls. Sometimes there was a spoon of jam for the bread or a piece of lard in the soup.

Surprisingly for Kati, the real starving came after liberation, when she was free to walk home to Czechoslovakia. This had been the most dismal period of her life. She didn't know what she would find when she returned home, and she was always on the verge of starvation. She walked home from Germany with a group of girls from the labor camp. No one would feed them. Farmers would chase them off of their land. They scavenged an existence from fields, garbage—anything, even eggshells. It was a month of walking and starving until the Americans. Then Kati had chocolate.

"Chocolate. I also know about chocolate, Kati."

Too many Jews had eaten too much chocolate. Perhaps they were on the verge of dying anyway, but so many died after they were freed because they couldn't stop eating chocolate. Willi had seen this in the barn the Americans called a field hospital. Jews who hadn't eaten in a long time would get their hands on the chocolate and gorge themselves. After the Americans saw what was happening, they tried to stop it, but for many Jews, it was too late. The young man in the cot next to Willi's couldn't stop. When he died they lifted his body. The bed was strewn with candy.

Kati had enough of this talk of starvation and people dying. That morning at breakfast with Willi in Jelsava, she decided to try for pleasant conversation. She wanted to talk about the nice things a young man and woman should talk about when they are courting. She asked Willi, when he was a boy, was there anything in particular he wanted to be when he grew up?

When he did not answer, Kati told him her secret.

"For me, it was a dancer."

In Kati's home there had been a special parlor, a living room filled with her mother's best Czech cut crystal, French tatted lace and wedding china. It was a room for company only; Kati and her brother were not allowed to play there. How Kati had loved to go in when no one was looking, close the shutters, hum a waltz and watch her reflection glide in the mirror.

Kati's voice cracked, shattering like the mirror, the crystal, and the china, now all gone. Still, she kept talking, telling Willi her dream. He took hold of her, saying that when he was a boy he thought he had a good imagination and would someday become a surgeon and do research.

Then he cradled her, without saying a word, for hours.

There was still no name for what had happened—the Holocaust. It wouldn't have a name for many years. All Kati and Willi knew was that most of the Jews they had known had not come home. They had no idea that it was the same all over Europe and they were the last ones home.

Later that morning, Sam Rosener returned to report that yes, the Secretary was planning another article.

"He can't make you stop seeing Etta. Right, Willi?"

I knew I could threaten to beat the Secretary up again, but I didn't want to physically go after him anymore. I didn't want to turn into an animal. I'd seen too many animals. So I decided to do what any good Jew would do.

"Sam, I will go see a lawyer and find out what can be done legally."

Overhearing this talk about Etta, Kati's heart nearly broke. Then she stopped this sad thinking.

She told herself, put a smile on your face, "That guy, he's going to be mine."

Kati Kellner would fight for Willi Salcer.

She did not realize that she had already won.

Willi walked Kati to the train station that afternoon. He told her that his sister would be back from Budapest in a few days. Perhaps Kati would like to come for another visit. Lilly would be very happy to see Kati again.

After Willi returned to the empty Weisz family home, he wrote Etta a very nice letter explaining that he was very sorry but he would have to break off with her. He said she was a very nice girl, and wished her the best in life.

I could not stay with Etta for the wrong reason.

Closure?
1996

When Ron called his mother after seeing the television program, he was so excited that Kati couldn't quite understand what he was saying. Holocaust. Jews. Hungary. My parents are heroes.

"Ronnie, what are you talking about?"

He'd just seen a program about survivors and at the end they gave a phone number. Ron called and gave his parents' information.

"You gave our phone number to strangers?"

No, not strangers, exactly. People from a foundation the director Steven Spielberg had started. They'll come and videotape and ask what happened during the War.

"Ronnie, what makes you think your father and I would agree to do this? I don't want to do this."

I was mortified that Ronnie wanted Willi and me to get in front of a camera and talk about what we never talked about. Willi didn't want to do it, either.

Ronnie kept pestering. He wouldn't let it go. His parents were heroes. Did they know they were heroes?

"Ronnie you are driving your father and me a little crazy."

He pushed and pushed. Maybe doing the tapes could help give his parents closure.

Closure?

Kati and Willi didn't have the heart to tell their son that for some things there were no endings.

Don't get me wrong. I don't have a problem with psychology. Our daughter Naomi is a psychotherapist and Willi and I are very proud of her.

Yes, very proud.

Psychology is fine—but for other people. After my double bypass surgery ten years ago, I had a depression that I couldn't kick so my cardiologist sent me to a psychiatrist. I asked the psychiatrist what could he possibly tell me to make me feel better? What good would it

do for me to look back and talk about the times I didn't think my mother understood me? I didn't have a mother around long enough to misunderstand me. All I can think about was the way she was taken from me, how I had watched her walk away with my brother and grandmother and straight to the gas. Okay, Mr. Psychiatrist, you tell me, how can talking to you resolve this? The psychiatrist agreed that there was nothing he could tell me and wrote out a prescription for Prozac. I took it, and after I felt better I called him and said it's done all it can, now's the time for me to stop. He agreed.

Kati was steadfast in her refusal to be taped until Ronnie called one day and said something that convinced her to reconsider. He wanted the Shoah tapes for his children. He wanted them to know what happened. He didn't want his parents to die without his children knowing.

Willi started to think it might be time to talk.

I told Kati that maybe we could do it for the children and the grandchildren, leave them a kind of legacy. Perhaps telling the story of our physical and emotional pain and suffering, would help make their characters stronger, humanly deeper. Certainly they will know where they came from and this knowledge would hopefully enrich their lives.

Kati made an appointment with the Shoah people. In the weeks before, she had nightmare after nightmare, but finally she felt emotionally prepared to get in front of the camera without breaking down.

I didn't want to leave my family the legacy of a crying grandmother.

Then she got the call. The Shoah people had a conflict and would have to reschedule.

I could have killed the Shoah people when they called and canceled. I had been all prepared to do this.

She told the Shoah people, "No problem. We can reschedule."

Two months later, Kati was a nervous wreck by the day of the interview, August 6, 1996.

Kati thought the Shoah tapes came out pretty well. She and Willi were interviewed for a couple of hours each. The interviewer covered the basics. Where they were born. Where they lived. Where they were during the War and a little about their lives after the War. Near the end of her taping, Kati showed the photographs Ilka the cleaning woman had saved.

As for Willi, before the interviews, he had looked into the Visual History Foundation and learned that the questions were based on academic research and developed by experts in the field. The interviewers were volunteers trained to ask the questions and not experts, so he did not expect follow-up questions.

All in all, Willi was impressed and thought the interviewer had covered things satisfactorily. However, there was one question he didn't quite know how to answer.

I've never known how to answer this.

The interviewer asked if Willi had considered fleeing when the Jews in his village were ordered to report to the town square.

Flee? Where?

How to explain there was nowhere to run, what it's like to be trapped. It wasn't as if Jews had obediently walked to their deaths. I was in a village where everyone knew me, and many took great pleasure in helping the Nazis round up Jews. Certainly there were those who had fled to the mountains—Slovakia is a hilly place with plenty of places to hide. Not everyone had the opportunity to flee—or took the chance when they had it. Do you abandon your family and run on your own? It was hard to know what to do.

Willi simply told the Shoah interviewer that no, he had not seriously considered fleeing.

When Kati and Willi gave copies of the Shoah tapes to Ronnie and Naomi, they thought that would be it. Then Ronnie said the tapes were only a bare outline. He wanted to know everything. He wanted a book.

"No, Ronnie," Kati told her son, "No book. The tapes are enough."

No Excuses
1935

Willi's mother had arthritis and every so often she would go to a spa for a cure. Whenever she was away, Willi had the keys and would close and open the crystal and hardware store for the salesmen before and after lunch.

> *One day I was busy playing with other children and came back a half-hour late. I was having fun and forgot about the time.*

The manager from the store had told Willi's Uncle Julius, the youngest of the Weisz brothers, that Willi had not showed up on time. Julius went looking for Willi. It was the first time he had ever spoken directly to his nephew.

> *Never before had my Uncle Julius said one word to me. He yelled that I hadn't come back. I was late. I told him the truth— I was playing and forgot. I was sorry and I would never do it again. He said there were no excuses. Then he beat me. He beat me until I thought I would die, but I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't let him see me cry. I would never let anyone see me cry.*

On the Map
1999

Both my son and wife have warned you that I don't like to talk about my feelings? Perhaps this is true. Before we begin today, if it's okay, I'd like to show you some maps, perhaps give you a better sense of where I come from. Here is Hungary. This is Budapest, where I attended school. Over here is Czechoslovakia. This is Jelsava where my mother's family lived. Before World War I, the mines of Jelsava were among the top producers of magnesite in the world. The population in 1900 was around 10,000, but it gradually lessened after the magnesite industry shrank. By the 1930's, when I lived there, the population was maybe four, five thousand.

Down here is Austria.

Excuse me. I was lost in thought for a moment.

Here was Mauthausen.

I will tell you about Mauthausen now if you like.

Telling God
April 1945

Talking to God was nothing new to Willi. As a boy, he had prayed twice a day; God and religion had been very important to him. In Mauthausen, when Willi had something he needed to say to God, he decided he had to do it face to face, not from the bottom of a hellhole.

Willi crawled out of the tent, not caring if one of the stupid, fat Ukrainian guards shot at him. He had to speak to God, and no one was going to stop him.

When he came to a clearing, Willi forced himself to stand up straight. He raised a fist to the stars, and from a voice that had shriveled to a whisper, found a shout.

"I do not believe in you."

Willi walked back, upright, in full view of the guards, who did nothing, not even laugh and sneer at the Jew. Inside the tent, he lay back down and stared into the air, with the rest of the living skeletons.

How could God exist and allow this?

Hair is Important
Summer 1944

You know, with all we talk about, what concerns me most today is that the beautician who did my hair is gone. Kaput. My beautician. I know this sounds silly, but how my hair looks is very important to me. You tell this to people and they look at you like you are crazy. My beautician is gone, someone else has done my hair, and I hate it. People say what's wrong with it. It looks great. But it's how I feel. How I see it.

This much Kati could see before the barber told her to look straight ahead: the crying girl behind her was very beautiful with hair like Shirley Temple.

Kati knew Shirley Temple from the movies in Budapest. Oh, how she had loved the movies. When she was younger she especially loved the Wizard of Oz. She could not remember how many times she had convinced her grandfather when he came to visit her at school to take her to see this movie.

As she grew older, Kati would go to the movies with other girls from school. The fifteen year olds especially liked the American movies that ended with a kiss.

Oh, to be held and kissed like that.

The pretty girl with the curls cried out when they shaved her head, "Why do you do this?"

Over and over, "Why do you do this?"

Why can't she be quiet? Doesn't she know everyone is upset over having their head shaved? Does she think she is special? We're all upset. She's making it worse for everyone. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

The girl with curls did not stop, "Why do you do this?"

This is when one of the young SS men who had been standing and watching and sneering at the girls—a young man with a beautiful baby face, a face pretty enough to be in an American movie—finally told the girl with the Shirley Temple curls.

"We shave your head to get rid of your filthy Jewish fleas."

Kati didn't see the SS man hit the beautiful girl—she had been too afraid to turn and look—but she heard the scream. When all was silent, Kati was very sorry she had wished the girl quiet.

I had beautiful hair as a young girl. You see this photo Ilka my father's cleaning woman had saved? That's me. My mother made

those braids. Everyday she would make me braids with ribbons. To think I complained that she combed too hard to get out the tangles.

PHOTO

They cut off large pieces of my hair before they shaved my head. I hate to think what happened to my hair. I had read somewhere they used the hair from Jews to make wigs—even as insulation for submarines.

A Secondhand Coat, and Bob
1968

What a fight they had. It seemed ever since Naomi had started Queens College, she insisted on wearing torn jeans instead of all the beautiful clothes hanging in her closet. Kati could not understand this. Naomi had all these gorgeous clothes and instead she wore junk from secondhand stores.

Kati put her foot down when her daughter came home with the torn black coat from the Army and Navy store.

Naomi, go look at your closet.

Do you know how hard your father works to buy you these clothes?

I wouldn't throw my dog into that coat.

During the argument, Kati became so angry that she took the coat from the closet and put it outside in the garbage, but stopped herself from saying the things she would regret.

She didn't tell Naomi how she would appreciate beautiful clothes if she knew what it was like to wear the same rag for a year.

She didn't ask Naomi if she had any idea what it had been like for her mother.

In Auschwitz, they had given Kati a rag of a dress to wear. A rag that didn't even fit. They thought that was funny. Give a big woman a tiny little dress. Give a small girl like Kati a tremendous dress. All to make you look ridiculous. Kati wore this same rag when she was sent to the labor camp. When she adds it all up, Kati wore that same rag for ten months. And those wooden clogs. Damn wooden clogs that cut her feet. Every step, she would ooze infection and blood.

No, Kati did not say the things she would regret.

Kati had promised herself that she would never do this to her children. She had known survivors who had done this. She hated some of the things they said to their children. You can't set the table because you have to study for a test? If I only had to worry about taking tests when I was in Auschwitz. You have problems? Let me tell you about problems. Don't like your supper? You don't know how lucky you are to have food. Not enough time to clean your room? How I wish I could have said, sorry, I can't go on this death march right now. There's a television program I don't want to miss.

Kati had wanted to be a normal mother so Naomi and Ronnie would have normal lives. So she never said these things, even when Naomi started wearing rags from the secondhand store.

Willi told me not to get so upset over Naomi's wardrobe. His theory was that in America children rebelled by rebelling against their parents. This was normal teenage behavior in this country and I shouldn't take it so personally. After Naomi's boyfriend Bob made a comment to Willi one night, I reminded Willi of this.

It was the usual conversation at the dinner table, with Willi trying to convince Naomi and her boyfriend Bob that America was a great country, and one reason it was a great country was because here they could protest. Yes, here in America Naomi and Bob could carry their signs and march against the war in Vietnam and feel secure that there was law to protect them and courts to turn to for justice. Soldiers were not going to take them away and shoot them. At most, Naomi and Bob would be dispersed with tear gas.

If Naomi and Bob wanted to talk about real political protest, Willi said they should talk about Zoltan Vas. Here was a real protester, a hero in Willi's eyes.

Even though the mention of some European they had never heard of must have elicited the customary eye roll from Naomi or Bob (or both), Willi continued to talk about his hero.

Zoltan Vas, Willi explained, was a Jew who was liberal politically and in the early 1920's spoke and wrote against the Hungarian government. The Hungarians put him in jail for sixteen years, until 1939 when the Russians traded him for some Hungarian flags they had captured—old flags that were a Hungarian point of honor. After the War, the Russians brought Zoltan back and he became the Mayor of Budapest. In the fifties he was the Minister of Commerce and Industry—the number two man in Hungary.

When he and Kati had lived in Israel they had been good friends with Ibolya Lieberman, Zoltan's sister. Ibolya's husband had been the Hungarian Consul to Israel. Willi added that Kati had recently written to Ibolya that the family would be visiting Budapest this summer and Ibolya said we must all meet her brother.

For a young woman involved in political protest, Naomi didn't seem all that excited over the prospect of meeting Zoltan Vas. Willi thought that perhaps it had to do with this being a family vacation and Bob not being included. Then again, it might have been because Willi had riled Naomi and Bob that evening in the way he seemed to upset them during all political discussions; Willi would ultimately mention that he thought President Nixon was a great statesman, especially in terms of foreign policy, and that seemed to drive Naomi and Bob a little crazy.

I am a typical immigrant who is more patriotic than Americans who are born here. When it comes to America, I am unconditionally patriotic, and I didn't mind letting Naomi and Bob know this.

Thinking back, it's hard for Willi to recall exactly what he said to elicit the age comment. Suddenly Bob, a nice boy from a nice Jewish family who had made its money in the party rental business, said to Willi, "Never trust anyone over thirty."

Willi and I had a good relationship with Bob, but can you believe he said this? I told Willi not to take it too seriously because in America young people rebelled by rebelling against their parents.

Naomi and Bob are divorced now, but there's still a relationship because of the children—they have three wonderful children. I must say that I took great pleasure in calling Bob and reminding him of what he said about people over thirty when he turned fifty.

Jelsava is not so Pretty
September 1945

After her surprise visit, Kati took Willi up on his invitation to visit Jelsava again when Lilly was back from Budapest. The girls quickly rekindled a friendship that had begun in Plesivec's ghetto, and Kati confided to Lilly her feelings for Willi. Lilly said she had no control over her brother in such matters—and she couldn't say for certain what was going on with Willi and Etta—but thought it would be very nice if her good friend Kati and brother married. That would make them sisters.

Perhaps Lilly could help the romance a little? Willi had mentioned taking a walk into the village. Maybe Lilly could be too tired to come along?

They hiked down the mile-long road from the Weisz family home and through the large park in the center of town. It was a majestic park with acres of trees that before the War had housed a fancy and exclusive hotel. People once came from all over Europe to enjoy the waters from the underground spring. Here, Kati. Come and taste the water. In this park there's also a castle that the King and Queen of Bulgaria had used as a summer home. Jelsava had been such a beautiful place.

It was still beautiful as far as Kati could see.

No, Kati. Not everything here is so pretty.

In the village, they passed his mother's crystal and hardware store, but Willi did not take Kati in. He wanted nothing to do with the store. The man who ran it meant nothing to him. Let him have it. Let him live with it. When Jews were no longer allowed to run their own businesses, this man had been handed the keys. At the time, he had been very nice, even sympathetic.

He said he had no interest in taking over. He was sorry, "But what can I do?"

After Willi's parents separated in 1934, his sister Lilly had gone to live in the two rooms behind the crystal and hardware store. When Willy and Lilly returned to Jelsava after the War, she went to the store.

The man who managed the store, someone who had known Lilly since she was a young girl, didn't say a word about being glad to see that she was alive. Instead he

started complaining about Uncle Alexander. *I went to see your Uncle the night before Jews had to report to the town square. I am a poor man. You know I am a poor man. I went to see Alexander and asked very nicely if I could have one of his suits. Jews could only bring what they could carry and Alexander Weisz had more suits than he could carry—and he certainly didn't need good suits where he was going. You know what your rich Uncle did when I asked for one lousy suit? Instead of giving me a suit, he gave me a bolt of material and told me to go make my own suit. I am a poor man and I had to spend money on a tailor to have a suit made!*

The man rummaged in a drawer and handed Lilly a photograph. It was of him, Lilly and her mother in front of the store. Lilly could have it. The man had no use for it.

PHOTO

Lily, her mother Irena and the Man

Not everyone in Jelsava, however, was unkind to Willi and Lilly. Shortly after they had returned, Mr. Kucera came to see them.

Mr. Kucera said he never forgot that when he was let go from the magnesite plant for being a Jew, it had been Alexander Weisz who gave him a job in the local office of his international lumber business. Now that Mr. Kucera was head of the magnesite plant, he wanted to help Willi in whatever way he could. Perhaps Willi would consider taking a technical position? With his engineering degree from the Industrial and Technical College, Willi would be perfect. There was a job for Willi as soon as he was ready. Mr. Kucera had always liked Willi and knew he had always been a top student.

While Mr. Kucera spoke, all Willi could think about were the little girls. Such beautiful baby girls. They must have only been two and three years old. Mrs. Kucera had taken such good care of them, always in pretty dresses with ribbons in their hair.

Willi wondered how Mr. Kucera could go on living among people who had watched and done nothing when the SS man smashed the heads of his beautiful baby girls. Before Mr. Kucera left, Willi said he was very sorry about his little girls. They had been such beautiful babies.

Mr. Kucera thanked Willi for remembering and said something about life going on.

See the cobblestone in the town square, Kati? This is where the SS man grabbed those beautiful babies by their feet and smashed their heads against the stones.

Wrenched these babies right from the arms of their parents. Jelsava is very pretty, but scratch the ground and the place is a graveyard. Willi is getting the hell out of here. He has plans. He can make in one trip smuggling what he would make in a year working in the magnesite plant. He'd like to get some money together this way and then see what he can do. Willi wants to make his own life.

Kati understood Willi wanting to direct his own life; she told him that she wanted the same.

Before Kati left Jelsava, she invited Willi and Lilly to Plesivec. Now that she had a cottage of her own, she could have company. Willi hated Plesivec, but didn't mind the idea of seeing Kati again, even though his plans for a new life did not include a wife.

Andrew's Observation
1980

Willi first met Andrew Herbst when he boarded with his family during his first year at the Industrial and Technical College, where Andrew was also a student. They were a very nice family and Mr. Herbst, a salesman for the Spielberg toy factory, was very kind to Willi, taking the time to talk to him about life in general. Willi met up with both Andrew and his father in Mauthausen. Of course, Mr. Herbst did not survive; no one over forty survived.

Why did so many people come after Jews with such ferocity after the Germans came into Hungary? No, I do not believe it was because of Jesus Christ even though we were invoked as Christ killers. I believe it had to do with envy. Jews are people of the book; we value education. Jews were the doctors and lawyers and business owners in these towns and villages. For the most part, the Christians were uneducated peasants. My old schoolmate Andrew Herbst once made an observation I agree with. He said, "Salcer, you know what's the difference between the United States and here? In the United States, when Mr. Smith your neighbor reaches a certain point and gets a nice house and car, you try to compete with him and do even better. Here, when Mr. Smith gets something, the neighbors try to take it away. Why does he have it and not me? They go to the police. This guy cheated. Take it from him. Give it to me.

Her Father's Shoes
September 1945

It was September and the fruit was ripe on the trees in Kati's garden when Willi and his sister Lilly came to visit, their first time in Plesivec since the ghetto. Kati was very proud that she had her own place with her own bed and basin. When Willi saw where Kati was living, he became angry at her situation.

Kati was living in the tiny workman's cottage behind the main house, her own house.

Willi noticed the cottage window was broken and set about fixing it. While he made repairs, Kati's took Lilly outside.

"Lilly, why don't you go pick a pear in the orchard—then get lost. Be a good friend and give me some time alone with your brother."

It was easy to bribe Lilly with good food, especially big luscious pears.

Can you believe this? She bribed my sister with fruit so she could be with me.

And you had no idea.

What do you mean? I knew. I saw right through your trick. But I went along. I didn't have a problem being alone with you, and maybe I was a little complimented that you should go to all the trouble.

Willi told Kati he could understand why she had originally moved into the cottage but he couldn't understand why she was still living here.

Kati had moved into the cottage because she had thought living in full view of the Christians living in her house would make it harder for them.

I wanted to be a constant reminder that this was mine and not theirs. They knew once I found my Uncle Pavel to run the pharmacy, they were out. I made no secret of this.

When Lilly and I came to visit, Pavel had been back for a few weeks and the Christians were out. He was living in the house and running the pharmacy. So why was Kati still in the cottage? I thought it was

maybe because she did not get along with Pavel's wife. Sometimes this happens, there cannot be two women running the same house.

I had looked for my Uncle Pavel but never found him. One day he simply showed up in Plesivec. He came walking down the street with a woman he said was his new wife. He and his twin brother Julius had fled to the Tatry Mountains. That's how he had survived. But no, I didn't have a problem with his wife. I hardly knew her, but she was okay. I had other reasons for staying in the cottage.

"Willi, I can't live in that house with my family gone. I just wanted those Christians out. That was my satisfaction. Let Pavel and his wife have it."

" I think it's wrong for you to be in this cottage when the house is yours."

"It's not what I want."

"What do you want?"

"Some china and my father's shoes."

"You are serious?"

When Kati had been looking for her Uncle Pavel, she had gone to Roznava, her father's and uncle's hometown. She had run into Gabi Strauss, and together they found Pavel's twin brother Julius at his house, but Julius said he didn't know what had happened to Pavel.

Julius and Pavel were twins. They looked exactly alike but were completely opposite in character. Pavel was college educated and very kind. Julius was an uneducated brute. When I was a child, one time Julius put on Pavel's white pharmacy jacket and came out to the garden. Thinking he was Pavel, my brother and I ran up to him. When we asked why he did this, Julius said he wanted to feel what it was like to get hugs and kisses.

In Julius' house, Kati saw some china that had belonged to her mother, and a pair of shoes that had belonged to her father.

I don't know how Julius had gotten his hands on the china and shoes. He wouldn't explain. I told him I wanted them back. He said no. Gabi asked Julius to give them back to me. He said no. So we left. Julius was a bully known to beat people up.

Willi promised Kati, "I will get your shoes and china for you."

Julius' door was unlocked and no one was home. Kati and Willi went inside and took the china and the shoes. Someone must have told Julius there were people in his house; he came rushing down the street yelling he was going to kill somebody.

Willi and Kati were out on the street with the china and shoes packed in a wheelbarrow when Julius met up with them. Willi stood holding the handles of the wheelbarrow while Julius yelled how he was going to beat Willi to a pulp.

Willi stood his ground and stared Julius down.

Julius blinked, and walked away.

This is when Kati Kellner realized that she could always count on Willi Salcer.

Before they left Roznava, she gave Willi her father's shoes. He said no, but she said please, she wanted Willi to have them. Only he could walk in her father's shoes.

What If?
Today

Whenever Kati thinks of the Czech peasant, she wonders, "What if?"

Behind Kati's house in Plesivec there had been a tremendous yard with a garden and orchard. At the end was a fence, and beyond the fence, a forest.

A person could go on forever in that forest.

The ghetto had begun in the house next to Kati's, and continued down for another four houses. Since no one could enter the ghetto without permission, people came in from the back, through the forest behind Kati's house.

All sorts of people came in through the forest with all sorts of news and rumors.

One day a peasant, a Czech farmer, came out of the forest. He had been sent to fetch Kati and her family. He had a letter from Kati's great-uncle, a wealthy man who lived in Bratislava.

"You can trust this man with your life. He's 100% reliable. I want you and your entire family to leave everything and follow this man right now."

Kati's mother asked, "What should we do?"

This was the first time my brother and I were involved in an adult decision. My brother was squeezing my hand—I didn't know what it meant. Do we go? Do we leave everything?

Kati's mother and grandmother said how could we go? They didn't know where the SS had taken Kati's father and grandfather. What if they come home? They will never find us.

I told my mother and grandmother that whatever they decided, I would do it.

They decided to stay.

To this day, Kati thinks of the Czech peasant and wonders, "What if?"

Last End Run
February 1945

Willi could never remember exactly how the friendship with George Salgo started. Salgo and Salcer—that's how they called each other, by their last names—were both fifteen and newly arrived at the Industrial and Technical College, the school started by the Budapest Jewish community in 1939. That year, the Hungarian *numeros clausus* law, which had capped the number of Jews in a university at 6%, was further tightened. *Numeros zeros.* No Jews allowed into universities, regardless.

Housed in Budapest's prestigious high school, the Jewish Gymnasium, the Industrial and Technical College was a clever end run to skirt the law. Under the guise of a trade school, the College would provide a practical as well as a classical university education to Jewish students between the ages of fifteen and nineteen.

Salgo and Salcer were members of the College's first class. George Salgo was from a prominent Budapest Jewish family, and Willi gained admittance through the help of his Uncle Joseph Salcer, a younger brother of his father and at one time Czechoslovakia's most renowned architect.

When Hitler came into Czechoslovakia in 1939, Joseph Salcer fled from Prague to Budapest with the help of his German secretary Ilka. Once there, he designed bomb shelters under an assumed name, and learned of the Industrial and Technical College. Perfect for his nephew Willi, now fifteen and wasting his life playing cards and listening to music in a coffee shop in Jelsava all hours of the night since he could no longer attend school.

Joseph Salcer called his nephew. "Willi, your dream of becoming a doctor. What can we do? You cannot be a doctor, but you can be an engineer."

The Industrial and Technical College had not accepted Willi at first. They said they were sorry but they could only take forty students, and Willi was a little weak in Hungarian grammar and literature. When they increased the class size to eighty, Willi had been accepted.

On first meeting, Salgo and Salcer immediately became friends, and over the next four years, spent five days in school together as well as the weekends. On Saturday nights, they especially liked to take girls dancing at the fancy hotels on St. Margrit's, the isle in the Danube between Buda and Pest.

Salgo and Salcer.

Boy, they were something, Willy's sister Lilly would often tell Kati during their months confined in Plesivec's ghetto. It was no wonder all the girls wanted them. They were smart, handsome and top athletes.

Willi was a star soccer player and George a champion swimmer, perhaps Hungary's best swimmer. If the Olympics had not been canceled, newspapers wrote that the record breaking George Salgo would have certainly won his country a Gold Medal. Salgo was such a superb athlete that the top swim club in Budapest, a club that did not technically permit Jews, overlooked his background.

That's how it went for Jews in Budapest. If you had enough talent, money—something people wanted—suddenly you were Hungarian and not a Jew. It made Willi uneasy that his friend swam for such a club, but it was this or nothing, and Salcer understood that for Salgo swimming was breathing. And it wasn't as if Salgo was one of those Budapest Jews who went around pretending to be Christian.

In general, Willi did not respect the Budapest Jews. He saw them trying to be more patriotic than the Hungarians themselves, always pounding their chests and yelling what good Hungarians they were. "After all, are we not Hungarians first!" As far as Willi could see, they accommodated in every possible way. Law after law was brought in against the Jews and many wanted to be Hungarian and not a Jew anymore, even changing their names to classical Hungarian.

This behavior made Willi uneasy. He was from Czechoslovakia where a Jew was a Jew, no matter what. Indeed, during Willi's four years at the Industrial and Technical College, the only time he received a poor grade was when he made remarks about the Budapest Jews.

For all of its 250,000 Jews, Budapest had one synagogue, with one leadership, and when its leadership was having elections, Willi spoke at a school assembly. His speech was mainly jokes, with half of the jokes poking fun at the current leadership, how they kowtowed when the government took the rights of Jews away. Willi mocked an election leaflet, taking it apart, point-by-point.

Overall, the students loved Willi. They cheered and clapped. Maybe they respected his words a little more because they'd heard how this captain of their soccer team comported himself whenever the team played outside of Budapest.

Inside the city, it was okay, but outside there were always problems. The crowd would yell for the referee to rule against the Jews. Even so, sometimes Willi's team would still win, and when they did, hundreds of people would rush down from the bleachers. Willi would yell for his team to run off the field. Sometimes they got away with only insults. Sometimes they had to physically protect themselves. Sometimes they

were beaten. It never occurred to Willi or his team not to play. And they always tried to win. Always.

Not everyone, however, thought so highly of Willi's remarks at the school assembly. The son of Epler, the current Secretary of the Budapest Jews, went home and told his father. The next day the headmaster called Willi in and threatened him with expulsion.

Would Willi like to be sent back to Jelsava? No, Willi knew what this meant. As a Jew he could no longer attend school, and he'd have to face the disappointment of his parents—and Uncle Joseph. This man had not only put considerable effort into helping his nephew gain admittance, but would meet with Willi every Saturday where they would walk and talk about his studies. Joseph Salcer had taken such an interest in his nephew's education that he had even sat in on some of Willi's classes. This, a professor had told Willi, was unprecedented.

Yes, Willi told the headmaster, he understood how his remarks at the assembly were unacceptable, and no, he did not wish to be expelled. He would no longer make such remarks and consider a C grade for poor behavior a warning.

From then on, Willi kept his politics quiet, but not quiet enough; a fellow student overheard the whisperings and reported Willi. When the headmaster learned that Willi was among a group of students talking in support of Communism—Willi saw it as a favorable alternative to Fascism—the headmaster said in no uncertain terms that such dangerous talk had to stop, or it could mean jail.

Willi was permitted to stay in the school. He graduated in 1943, and remained in Budapest. As a Jew, he was not allowed to work as an engineer, so he found some lower-level technical work. He played soccer in various leagues, and continued to take girls dancing on the weekends with his friend George Salgo.

By New Year's Eve of 1944, both Salgo and Salcer thought the War would soon be over, that it was a matter of months. They considered themselves lucky that they had spent the War years in Hungary. They 'd heard the rumors about Russia and Poland, how Jews had been sent to work camps. There had even been talk that the Germans were burning Jews in ovens, but no one believed this; it was too incredible to be true.

Salgo and Salcer went to the New Year's party at the fancy hotel on St. Margrit's ready to dance with all the pretty girls and celebrate the War ending. There was one girl, a nice girl, and a very pretty girl, who caught Willi's attention. Willi knew she had a reputation. He also knew what could happen. He understood such matters.

Willi told the doctor that he had no excuse. He also knew it was important to listen to his doctor. So why didn't he take the treatments as prescribed? Again, no excuse. If Willi had listened, his sister Lilly would not have noticed her brother looked ill and called their father, who came to Budapest and took Willi home to his mother in Jelsava.

In March of 1944, Willi was recuperating in Jelsava when the Germans came into Hungary. Upon the German Army's arrival, they installed a new government, replacing Hungary's Prime Minister Miklos Kallay, a man who had infuriated Hitler. Was it not Hilter who had helped Hungary regain territory it had lost after the First World War? Everything Hitler had done and now he hears Kallay had tried to make a separate peace with the Allies. And what sort of game was Kallay playing with his Jews? Why were almost a million still alive in Hungary when they were dead all over Europe? Yes, Hungary had anti-Jewish laws, but Hitler did not simply want the Jews poor and humiliated; he wanted them dead. Now it was time.

Willi was trapped. In a small town like Jelsava, there was no place to hide. It was not like Budapest where you could lose yourself, maybe pass, like his friend George Salgo. When the Germans came in, Salgo had gotten himself a Hungarian officer's uniform. Instead of hiding, he would walk the streets of Budapest dressed in this uniform with the erect posture of an officer. Willi was told that George Salgo had cut such a handsome and dashing figure that he was constantly saluted.

It was when the Russian army came into Budapest in February of 1945 that Salgo made his one mistake. Joyous, he ran outside, raised his arms and shouted a welcome to the oncoming tanks.

A Russian soldier shot him dead.

In his euphoria, George Salgo had forgotten about the uniform, and Willi Salcer lost his best friend.

Many times Willi would think what if he had not gone with the girl from the New Year's Eve party? He would have stayed in Budapest and gotten himself a Hungarian officer's uniform like George Salgo. Together they would have walked the streets looking dapper. When the Russians entered Budapest, Willi would have reminded his friend to take off the damn uniform before he ran out on the street to greet them.

Then perhaps long after the War, they would tell their children the story of Salgo and Salcer and their clever end run.

I had many friends in Budapest, but you could say George Salgo was my best friend. In my entire life, I would never have another friend like George Salgo.

Jewish Playboy
1975

After graduation, Ronnie drove home from Boston under a weight of obligation. What he really wanted to do was to go to California—he already had a couple of friends out there. What could be more exciting than driving across country? Living in California. Think of it. Instead, Ronnie felt a responsibility to work for his father. He thought it was expected, and he could not disappoint his father. He would take the sales position at Dynex.

Willi had opened Dynex Plastics in Moonachie, New Jersey in 1970, three years after he had sold the plastic lace tablecloth factory to the Papercraft Corporation. He had agreed to stay on and run things for two years, but when this commitment was over, he and Kati took it easy. They traveled, tried to enjoy life, but Willi got restless.

"Kati, how long can a person sit on a beach and do nothing?"

So Willi opened a new factory.

On the morning Ronnie was heading home from Boston, Willi was thinking that maybe his son should not come and work for him. Willi was sorry he had ever mentioned to Ronnie that with his outgoing personality and degree in business he would be perfect for sales at Dynex. Together, father and son would be unbeatable.

Willi still believed this, but he told Kati that now he was thinking becoming the boss' son was not such a good idea. Would Ronnie understand this? Was he counting on working with his father? Would he think his father didn't want him?

I remember thinking if I had not gotten away from my mother and gone to school in Budapest, I would have grown up to be a weakling, a softy who could not take care of himself. I loved my mother, but she had me convinced that I was delicate and needed to be taken care of. I didn't think I could do anything for myself. I didn't want this for Ronnie.

"Willi, you know when Ronnie comes back I will let him lead his own life."

"Kati. I'm not worried about you. It's me. I know I can be a little overwhelming."

"A *little* overwhelming?"

Kati knew Willi had a point, but it tore at her the idea of Ronnie not coming home. Kati hadn't liked Ronnie leaving in the first place, but she let go. When Ronnie first applied to college, Kati had told herself she would behave like any normal American mother whose child wanted to go away to school. She was proud that she had held back except for a hint or two.

"Your sister Naomi lived at home when she went to college. Why live in a dormitory when you can live in a beautiful home?"

How happy it had made her when Ronnie chose Hofstra University on Long Island, a school not too far from Forest Hills, Queens. Then Ronnie says he wants to transfer to Boston University. Why Boston? Why so far?

Willi had convinced Kati to let Ronnie go. He knew his wife was having a little difficulty; that normal separation was not in her experience. With her parents, there was no goodbye.

"Kati, you ever imagine what your life would have been like if you could have done anything you wanted?"

"You, the children and the grandchildren. This is what I want. I'm right where I want to be."

That night at supper with Ronnie, Willi brought up his son's future.

"Ron, I know we had discussed your working for me, but I was thinking before you come to Dynex, I would like you to go further in school."

"I don't want any more school right now. Maybe in a year or two."

"Okay, Ron. You don't want more school now..."

"I was thinking I'd come to work at Dynex, like we had discussed."

"Tell me, if you could do anything, what would that be?"

"Work at Dynex."

"No, not Dynex. If you could do anything, anything in the world—imagine your father does not own this factory—what would that be?"

"Ronnie, you can tell your father. It's okay if Dynex is not your first choice. You can say if you're thinking of something else. We want to know what you want."

"Well, I have some friends out in California. I was thinking I'd like to go out to California and see what I can do."

When I heard Ronnie say California, I wanted to say why so far away, but I held my tongue. I think Willi felt the same way.

"Ron, you know what. Why don't you try it on your own for a few years and then we will do something. Why don't you try California?"

Ronnie was so excited when Willi told him this. You could see that all he was thinking was that he was going to California. I tried to hide that I was upset that he was going so far away; I didn't want to ruin his happiness.

In a few weeks, Ronnie said goodbye and left.

Yes, he left, but not before I bought him a new wardrobe. I told Ronnie if he were going to go out into the world and work, he had to look nice.

Ronnie did very well in California. My sister Lilly's husband, George Gero, was in eyeglass frames. Manufacturing, importing frames. He sold to the major department stores. He said, Ronnie I could use a representative on the West Coast. This was Ronnie's first job.

Ronnie was very successful selling for George. Wasn't he Willi?

Yes, he was. I asked him once, how do you do that? He says well, first I play golf. Usually I deliberately lose. We become friends. They say, okay, you tell me what I need. I tell them what they need.

My son Ronnie can charm a snake. That's his nature.

When Ronnie first went out to California and started making all this money, he asked me where he should invest. I told him where and the next thing I find out is that he didn't invest but he bought a speedboat.

A speedboat. He never listened to Willi.

Yes, he did. Sometimes. But he was free, a young single man. Why not? He could do anything in the world.

Willi, should we say the nickname Ronnie had when he was young and in California.

The Jewish Playboy?

That's it.

Ronnie says he's surprised to hear his mother was upset over his moving to California? No, Kati never told him it upset her. We didn't want him to feel guilty.

Marry Me, or Goodbye
October 1945

No, Willi had told her. It wasn't a good idea for Kati to come with him to Budapest. This trip would be much too dangerous. There were Russians soldiers all over, and it was routine for them to rob trains. If you resisted, they shot you and no one was held responsible. There was chaos all over. The fist ruled.

What was there to be afraid of? So what if Willi were smuggling. Kati could be a help to him. People were less likely to suspect a couple than a young man traveling alone.

Yes, I was smuggling. I had done a little research on what was needed. Cigarettes were plentiful and cheap in Hungary and expensive and rationed in Czechoslovakia, while sewing needles were plentiful in Czechoslovakia and scarce in Hungary. So I'd take cigarettes to Prague—a maitre d' at a fancy restaurant would buy my entire supply—and with this money I would purchase millions of sewing needles and take them to Budapest.

I still saw no reason why I couldn't come along on the trip.

I relented and agreed to take Kati.

In the Budapest department store, Willi tells Kati that he would like to buy her something pretty. Why doesn't she look? Fine, Kati says, but not a dress. She will look for a hat. She'd like to see if they have a black hat with cherries like her mother wore. Okay, a hat then. Whatever Kati wants. He will be right back.

When Willi returns he surprises her with a special gift.

I had had a photograph taken of myself the last time I was in Budapest and had it framed for Kati.

PHOTO

"I'm still too thin and my hair not so thick."

"How handsome you are."

The photograph touches Kati; she takes it as a reflection of his affection and intentions. Perhaps this is why it confuses her when Willi says he has decided not to

take Mr. Orban up on his offer. Kati had imagined Willi would say yes to Mr. Orban, marry her and they would start a life in Budapest.

Mr. Orban was the father of one of my classmates. Before the War, he had been vice president of a company that manufactured tractors and trailers. He'd been high society in the Jewish circles of Budapest and still had many connections. He told me that Communism was here to stay, and forming a cooperative was the way to go. They needed seven people to do this. Was I interested? I told Kati that a cooperative was too limiting—there would always be a cap on how well I could do. Plus, I didn't want to live in Budapest. After seeing how Budapest Jews behaved during the War, I did not think this was the place for me.

If Willi didn't want to work with Mr. Orban, what did this mean for Kati? Did he simply want to keep on with his smuggling and have Kati as a fancy girlfriend? Did he think she would settle for such a life? A new dress here and there? Think again. No, thank you.

I didn't want to lose this guy, but I also wanted to have a family and a normal life.

On the train from Budapest, Kati gave Willi her ultimatum.

"I can't wait forever. Either marry me, or goodbye."

I didn't like hearing this. It scared me. I thought, I'm born then I'm married. I didn't give Kati an immediate answer.

When the train comes to a sudden, unscheduled stop, it 's Kati who spots the Russian soldiers first. She tosses her shawl to Willi and tells him quick, put it over your head. She sees this is not enough to disguise him so she throws her blanket over his lap to cover his trousers. She tells Willi he makes a pretty good-looking old woman.

A Russian soldier demands, "Davaj chassi."

Kati looks at him, not knowing what he wants. The soldier rolls up a sleeve and points to all the watches on his arm. Good, Kati thinks, he only wants watches. He searches her bag, glancing at the photograph of Willi. How stupid; the soldier doesn't notice that the young man in the photo and the old woman sitting next to her are one and the same. Stupid Russian bastard.

The soldier tosses Kati her bag and nods to Willi, respectfully, like any good boy to his grandmother. He leaves the car without searching Willi's makeshift seat: two suitcases stuffed with contraband cigarettes.

Willi takes the blanket from his own lap, wraps it around Kati and lights her a cigarette. He notices she is trembling. It's okay. The Russians are gone. She doesn't mention to Willi that she is trembling because she knows what Russian soldiers can do. They can do anything.

"Kati, I'll go on to Prague alone and meet you next week in Jelsava."

She says no, that she will accompany him. Look, what a help she had just been to him. Willi says there will be no arguing; he doesn't want her with him while he is smuggling. It's too dangerous. End of discussion.

He doesn't mention it, but Willi also wants time alone to think about her ultimatum.

I didn't want to marry but I didn't want to lose Kati. I was angry that she had handed me a marriage ultimatum; I didn't like ultimatums. And I was convinced that she had made up the suicide story to gain my sympathy. I simply could not believe that a girl filled with so much life would have tried to kill herself. Then there was Gabi Strauss. I knew I had to make a move or I would lose Kati to Gabi. I knew he was still in love with her.

When Willi returns to Jelsava, he immediately announces to Kati and Lilly what he has decided.

"I don't want a job. I will continue with the smuggling for now. The three of us will live here and I will be responsible for the money."

Kati offers, "I will do the cooking, and Lilly the cleaning."

"Kati, we will go to the Mayor's office tomorrow, if you'd like."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

Love Match?
2000

Was my parents' marriage a love match? I don't know. I really can't tell you much about their marriage. Children didn't speak to adults about such matters. Not like today. I go to Ronnie's house in California and we sit at the dinner table and my granddaughters ask questions—believe me—any question. Where did you meet mommy? When did you fall in love with daddy? Ronnie is married to a beautiful girl named Lois, and by beautiful I mean not only on the outside but also in her heart. No, she is not Jewish. That was not a concern for Willi and me. I don't care if a person is that or that—I look at the heart. Ronnie first met Lois in college. They married after she told him that she wasn't going to wait around forever. A priest and a rabbi married them, and they were under the chupah just like Willi and me.

PHOTO

But no, I have no stories of a great romance between my own parents. I have no idea how they met. I do know they always spoke to each other kindly and treated each other with the greatest of respect. Here is a photograph. See how warmly they look at each other? They looked this way at each other even without a camera watching.

PHOTO

Kati's Parents, Ilona and Ladislav Kellner

October 15 or 16
1945

On October 16, 1945, seventeen-year-old Katarina Kellner put on her mother's polka dot dress and accompanied twenty-one year old William Salcer to the Mayor's office in Jelsava, where they were married in a five-minute civil ceremony.

Excuse me, Kati. I don't mean to interrupt, but wasn't it October 15th?

What do you mean October 15th? It was October 16th. He never remembers.

Are you sure?

Of course I'm sure.

After the wedding, Willi did some more traveling while Kati settled into the eleven-room Weisz family home in Jelsava with her best friend Lilly.

I came home with the money, and Kati had not done one bit of cooking. Not one bit.

And your sister Lilly had not done one bit of cleaning.

But we were happy.

Yes, we were happy.

Soon after Kati and Willi's civil ceremony, the Schrieber family came to Willi. Elizabeth Schrieber was getting married. The Schriebers were a very religious family and said Willi's parents would be turning in their graves over his living in sin with Kati. They had to have a Jewish wedding. The Schriebers had everything for a wedding and wanted Willi and Kati to have a double wedding with Elizabeth and her fiancée.

I talked it over with Kati and we said we would do it.

Elizabeth was a simple girl but a nice girl, a seamstress as I remember. She had been a Kapo in Auschwitz.

But a good Kapo.

Does this surprise you our saying someone was a good Kapo? Elizabeth was the sort of Kapo who tried to help other Jews whenever

she could. I know some people, especially Jews, will judge her for having been a Kapo. But these were times when the world was upside down. You can't judge what people did by normal standards. Nothing was normal.

So Kati and I had the wedding with Elizabeth and we stood under the same chupah.

I remember I felt very lonely because I had no family there. I never felt so lonely in all my life. Willi had Lilly and some childhood friends. But you know, after I married Willi that day, I never felt alone again.

May I add something here? It was Kati's love and understanding that brought me through the difficult times. I love her more today than ever. She is everything to me. I don't like to think what my life would have been like if I hadn't married Kati.

It's getting late. Maybe we've said enough for today.

Naomi and the Gypsy
1968

The boy was extremely handsome, this son of Hungary's most famous Gypsy musician. His father was playing in the Gellert, the fancy Budapest hotel where Kati, Willi and the children were staying during their family vacation that summer of 1968. The Gellert had many fine restaurants, and in one of the restaurants they played Gypsy music from noon until midnight. This is where Naomi had met him.

Naomi speaks fluent Hungarian. Willi and I thought the hotel was safe, so we saw no reason not to allow her to go listen to music.

When Naomi first tells her mother that she has met the love of her life, Kati tries to be reasonable.

"Naomi, you only met this boy three days ago."

"Ema, you said the minute you laid eyes on Aba you knew he was the man you were going to marry. You were only sixteen. I'm twenty years old. You treat me like a baby."

"Naomi, what do you know about Gypsies? You are a nice Jewish girl from Forest Hills."

"Did you ever think maybe there's more to me?"

"Of course I know there's more to you, but what is wrong with being a nice Jewish girl from Forest Hills?"

"You can't talk me out of this. I love him."

"Naomi, what about Bob?"

"What about Bob?"

"Last I remember you were going to marry Bob."

Kati tells Willi she cannot understand this. They had worked so hard to give their children a beautiful life and now Naomi wants to travel around Europe singing for her supper.

"Willi, what is wrong with Naomi? She thinks it's romantic to travel around dirty little villages in a wagon?"

"Be careful, Kati. If she thinks you don't like him because he is a Gypsy, she will like him even more because he is a Gypsy."

"What kind of life will she have with this boy? People here hate the Gypsies. And they're not too crazy about Jews, either. People will spit on them."

"Kati, I agree with you but I don't think it's anything more serious than a little summer flirtation."

"You're right. It's a very American thing to do. Come to Europe and fall in love with some handsome guy. This will pass."

On the way to Budapest's Jewish Cemetery, Kati explains to Naomi and Ronnie how her father Ladislav Kellner had come from a very poor family. He grew up in Roznava, a small town about twenty miles from Plesivec. He had educated himself, worked as a waiter to put himself through college and become a pharmacist. Because she had to leave for Palestine, this was her first time visiting her father's grave.

When they near his gravesite, Kati says she wants to go the last steps alone. Willi lets go of her arm and stands respectfully behind. Naomi and Ronnie wait patiently off to the side while their mother weeps.

"Willi, what the hell is he doing here? And why the hell is he crying like that?"

I couldn't believe it. I turned around and the Gypsy boy is with Naomi, bawling his eyes out, crying more than any of us. Loud, loud sobs. This guy is crying for someone he doesn't even know. The first time I get to see my father's grave, and here's this guy crying for all the Jews of Europe. I told Willi to please get him the hell out of here. Naomi of course thought this guy was sensitive and beautiful for doing this, nothing like Bob, her fiancée.

On the morning they are to leave Budapest, Kati checks on the children to make sure they are packed and ready. This is when she finds the note.

She runs for Willi.

"Naomi is gone!"

"What do you mean Naomi is gone?"

Their daughter had left with the Gypsy boy, the love of her life. It was all in the note.

Willi promises Kati that they will not leave the country without Naomi. Do not worry. He will find her.

I cannot tell you how frightened I was when I discovered Naomi was gone. I was terrified that we'd never see her again. I wanted to kill her.

I went immediately to Zoltan Vas. He had retired from the government and was writing books, but was still a very influential and powerful person in Hungary. Zoltan and I had become friendly while Kati and the children and I were in Budapest. I asked him to help find Naomi. He promised he would use all the resources at his disposal.

With the help of Zoltan Vas and his many connections, Naomi is found and delivered to her parents later that morning. On the drive to Plesivec that afternoon, no one speaks of the Gypsy boy. He won't be mentioned again for many years.

Once back home, Naomi continued at Queens College, and after graduation, married Bob. They have their wedding in the big backyard of her parents' home in Forest Hills. It's a large formal affair with a huge rented tent, compliments of Bob's family. Willi never walked prouder as he led his daughter down the red carpet to give her away. How beautiful she looked. How happy Kati is that Naomi acceded to her wishes and wore a beautiful wedding dress.

No wearing jeans on the beach at daybreak, thank you, with all the guests covered in those love beads. Naomi wore a beautiful gown. Here she is with me. See how beautiful she looks?

PHOTO

Take a look at this wedding picture. Look at Kati's hair. What the hell was that?

I wore a piece in the back. What do men know? Perhaps I should also mention that I had bought Naomi an absolutely gorgeous trousseau for her honeymoon, but of course, what did she wear? Her old sneakers and torn jeans. Sometimes there's only so much a mother can do.

Naomi and Bob eventually moved to New Jersey where they raised a family and Naomi worked as a teacher. Some years later, after the divorce, Naomi went back to school and became a therapist. Not

simply a therapist but a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. Kati and I are very proud of her.

What do I think when I look back on the Gypsy? I think maybe Naomi had to have some sort of romance before she married. That happens. Budapest is a very romantic place and he was a very handsome boy. Was he the love of her life? I hope not. But I have to tell you, if I had to do it again, I would take her home to America in a second. It was not simply the boy being a poor Gypsy; I couldn't let Naomi live in a country where they hated Jews. That place was a graveyard to me. Still is.

Kati, did you mention what we've heard of the Gypsy boy?

Since that 1968 trip, Willi and I have pretty much gone back to Hungary every two or three years. The last time we came home—maybe the 1998 trip—I called Naomi and asked if she remembered that Gypsy boy. I had learned that he was the most famous Gypsy musician in all of Europe. Naomi laughed and said maybe she should call him. I said, why not. Who knows?

The Devil's Arithmetic
1999

437,402 Jews from Hungary and the annexed portion of Czechoslovakia were transported to Auschwitz between May 15 and July 10, 1944. 400,000 were gassed upon arrival and the rest sent into slave labor, including Kati Kellner. Of these 37,402, it's believed only five percent made it back home, 2,170 people.

Approximately 15,000 men survived Mauthausen. Of these, it's estimated that the number of Jewish survivors was not more than ten percent or 1,500. Willi Salcer was among these Jews.

When it comes to the Holocaust, there are all these big numbers but how can one person grasp six million people? It's too much to comprehend. To understand, you have to think of one. That's why I liked The Devil's Arithmetic. For me this movie was an accurate depiction of what it felt like for one young girl to suddenly find herself in Auschwitz—and can you believe it but this was not a big Hollywood movie or an artsy film but a TV movie of the week.

I also thought it was an excellent movie. (Phone rings) The telephone, Kati, should I answer it?

It's probably for you.

How does she know this? Excuse me.

The Devil's Arithmetic is about a contemporary young Jewish girl who does not appreciate what she has or what the Jewish people had gone through. She's at a family Seder when she is suddenly transported back in time to Poland during the early years of the War. From there she is sent to Auschwitz and realizes what a spoiled little girl she had been—I remember those feelings as if it were yesterday. Perhaps this is why I appreciate anything and everything. After the War when I moved into the cottage behind my parents' home I was excited that I had my own washbasin. When we first came to this country and I went to Alexander's department store and bought six pairs of new underwear, I was on top of the world. Sometimes Willi encourages me to spend more on myself. After he started making money in Israel he would often tell me why don't you go out and buy yourself a new dress.

Kati, the phone was for you. It was your jeweler. I told him you would return his call.

Good.

Her jeweler. I told you she was a Jewish princess.

And he loves it. Look at his smile. He loves it.

Spoiled Little Girl
June 1944

Kati, her mother, grandmother and brother arrive in Miskolc from Plesivec around noon. They are ordered off the train and onto the hilly slope along the track. They find a place among the hundreds of Jews already sitting, waiting in the hot sun. Kati's grandmother sits in front of her and her mother to her left. There's no food, no water; all they can do is sit. Kati's brother Alexander fidgets back and forth between the two women, and Kati thinks of what a spoiled little girl she had been.

Had she really thought her parents mean and unreasonable because they made her do schoolwork, practice the piano, walk across a room balancing a book on her head? Did Kati really refuse to eat everything on her plate even though her mother told her she would have to sit there until she ate every last piece of vegetable? Why couldn't her mother understand that all she liked to eat were cold cuts and chocolate? These vegetables smell bad. Fine, Kati didn't care if she had to sit at the table alone for hours. She wasn't going to eat her vegetables; she didn't care if her mother thought she was a spoiled little girl.

Not only did her mother make her eat everything, she made Kati eat with the best of manners. There'd be no picking up chicken with her hands unless her grandfather, who spoiled her silly, gave her a wink, picked up a leg and asked her to join him. Oh, how her grandfather had spoiled Kati. He was why she was the only girl in the village to have a ladies bicycle, a rare and unusual item in Czechoslovakia in 1941.

How did her parents ever put up with her? When they sent her to that first school in Budapest, the place where they made the girls sleep with the windows open when it was freezing and wash in the morning with ice-cold water, Kati had written to her grandfather, "Help! Please get me out of this place!" When her grandfather said he could not interfere, eleven-year-old Kati faked a fever by upping the temperature on the thermometer when no one was looking.

Kati knew that her parents would not keep her in a school that made her sick. That's when they sent her to Forstner, the dormitory for rich, snobby girls. She loved it there, felt right at home with all the other little spoiled girls. .

During the night on the hilly slope with her mother, grandmother and brother, Kati promises God that she will be good and no longer the spoiled little girl she had been. If God will make everything okay, if God will let her family go home, she will be good. She

will do her homework and practice the piano without complaining. She will even pray and go to temple. Yes, she will go to temple and stay for the entire service and not sneak out early on Yom Kippur with her grandfather who doesn't think it's such a good idea for children to go so long without eating.

Please God I will be good, I will do all these things, if you will let everything be okay. Please, God. Please.

All night, Kati holds onto her mother and grandmother and brother.

In the morning, she hears an SS man shout, "Everyone up on the train. Now."

Please God I will be good if you let everything be okay.

They are locked in a cattle car with maybe eighty other people—it's too crowded to count. There's only enough room to stand. In the middle of the car there's one bucket for a bathroom and one with water for drinking. It's dark and there's not enough air.

For two or three days, Kati stands holding her mother and grandmother and brother. She stands and listens to the crying and talking. Sometimes the crying is soft, sometimes a wail. Someone recites poetry. Others speak and make no sense at all. Mothers tell their children everything will be okay, you will see.

Kati doesn't know what is going to happen, but she knows it will be terrible.

Please God I will be good if you let everything be okay.

When the train finally stops the doors open.

Kati never asks God for anything again.

Candles in Rego Park
1960

Every night before the children brush their teeth, Kati gives them a piece of chocolate just like her own mother had done with Kati and her brother Alexander. But Ronnie is doing something odd before he pops the candy into his mouth; the seven year old quickly touches his head, heart and then his shoulders.

"Willi, I want you to come and see what Ronnie does."

Willi asks Ronnie what is he doing and the boy says the kids in the cafeteria at school do this before they eat their lunch.

"Kati, I think I know what this is. Ronnie is making the Sign of the Cross."

This is when Kati decides it's time for candles.

In Israel, where everyone was Jewish, we never had to make a special effort with the children over being Jewish. No reason, everyone was Jewish. Since Willi and I are not religious Jews, we never did candles. In America, we started to do candles every Friday so the children would have a sense of what it meant to be Jewish.

Walk out the Door, Leave Everything
1939

When I look back, the saddest part about fleeing my father's hotel in Hnusta after the Slovak army took over was his leaving everything behind after he finally had something again. That small hotel was the first business venture that was in any way successful for my father since the family farming business went bankrupt ten years before. After his hotel was taken over by the army, he told my Aunt Ibolya and me to walk out with only the clothes on our backs—it had to look as if we were just going out for a walk. This was the only way.

After the Cabbage
February 1946

Willi came home to Jelsava that cold February day with a pocketful of gold and a big smile on his face. No wonder he was happy. This would be the last of his traveling. There would be no more smuggling, thanks to the cabbage. A week before he had purchased a trainload at a special price, and with Kati and Sam Rosener, sold it in Jelsava's town square. What fun Kati had calling out, "Cabbage, cabbage." With food still scarce, they had sold every head within an hour.

"This is it, Kati. No more wheeling and dealing."

Now Willi would take all their money and go to Kati's great-uncle who had a brokerage house in Budapest. He would ask her uncle to convert his Czech and Hungarian currency into gold coins and dollars.

"Then we will make our move."

Willi had given up on trying to find out what had happened to the Weisz family millions—it was as if the fortune had completely vanished. Now his first choice was to sell the properties in Jelsava and Plesivec and go to America. Granted, they still didn't have a sponsor—it was impossible for a Jew to gain entry to America without a sponsor—but Willi was certain he would find a way.

Among my Uncle Alexander's papers, I found the name of a doctor living in America. The relationship of this man to Alexander was not clear, but it was apparent that Alexander had supported his education through medical school. I thought that perhaps he could be a son. Although Alexander never married he did have lady friends. I wrote and asked if he would sponsor Kati and me. He never replied.

What Willi did not know on that cold February day when he came home to Kati with a big smile on his face was that there was a letter waiting that would change everything in an instant.

"Kati, I cannot do this. I cannot go into the Czech army."

The letter said Willi had to report for a medical examination the next week.

The Czechoslovakia where I grew up was a democracy. Now the Communists were taking over. Most of the Jews were gone. Murdered. I did not want to serve this country.

Maybe Willi could get a medical excuse. Maybe Kati's Uncle Pavel could help. Perhaps there was something in the pharmacy he could give Willi to make him look sick. Willi also had a friend, a doctor in the army. Maybe he could help.

Willi's doctor friend promised that he would fail the physical, and Kati's Uncle Pavel gave Willi medication that would speed up his heartbeat.

When Kati and I went to the place for the exam, I took the medication before I got on line, but it was such a long wait—four or five hours before my turn—that it wore off. When I was finally called in, there was my captain doctor friend and another doctor as well as some others.

The doctor friend whispered to Willi that he couldn't do it, "Too many people."

Willi explained that he was not well, health wise, "My back."

His back has pained him since lifting concrete sacks twelve hours a day when he was forced to build an airstrip in Hajdunanash.

The doctors could see nothing wrong with Willi's back.

Willi showed them the scar from where he had been shot by the SS while on a march from Hungary to Austria, "I have a bad leg."

When the scar didn't impress them, Willi mentioned constant stomach pains and headaches. Perhaps this was from contracting typhoid or maybe from starving.

The examination was over. Willi could go now.

A week later, Willi received a notice that he had been deemed fit for service and was to report the following week.

"Kati, let's leave everything and go to Lilly."

They would go the next morning to the secret camp outside of Bratislava where Lilly was training for a new life in Palestine. There would be no goodbyes. Nothing.

It was the only way. I was an escapee from the army. They would have thrown me in jail if they had caught me. And I couldn't tell anyone I was leaving. Anyone I would have told might have gotten into trouble for protecting me.

His last night in Jelsava, Willi went for a walk. When he ran into Sam Rosener, his young friend excitedly asked about their next wheeling and dealing plan. Whatever Willi wanted, he could always count on Sam. Willi patted Sam on the back and told him that he had always been a good friend. He wanted Sam to remember this.

Flying into Switzerland
Early Winter 1960

When they landed in Switzerland, Kati bundled Naomi and Ronnie in their new winter coats saying how she hoped they would be warm enough. It can get very cold here in Europe. The climate was nothing like Israel, the only place the children had ever known.

Stepping down from the plane, Naomi, a few months past thirteen and still in anklets, shivered as the cold wind snapped at her bare knees. Her younger brother Ronnie, now almost six, shouted, "Aba! Aba!"—Hebrew for "Poppa"—when he saw Willi waiting across the runway.

Willi, holding a kilo of fancy Swiss chocolate, beckoned his family through the falling snow. I did it, he thought. I had the money smuggled in. Now my family is safe with me. It is over.

Ronnie broke free of his mother's hand and ran straight into his father's arms. He ran so fast that no one would ever guess this once was the stiff-legged boy who had contracted polio when he was three.

When Willi saw Ronnie coming towards him, he remembered the special big red ball filled with helium. Willi would toss this ball to his son, aiming it so it would hover inches above the boy's head, enough to make Ronnie jump for it. Willi was certain this was one of the reasons Ronnie's legs strengthened. How Ronnie loved to jump for the big red ball. How glad Willi was that he had never refused to play ball with his son, even when he was saddled with worry over the rubber factory.

"Catch," Willi said as he tossed his son the big bar of chocolate.

It was a tremendous piece of chocolate. One kilo—about two pounds.
It was almost bigger than Ronnie. He carried it like a weight.

For Naomi and Ronnie, this trip was a great adventure, their first time flying on an airplane and seeing snow. After Switzerland, they would go onto France and England and see even more new and wonderful things.

Kati and Willi led the children into the airport terminal telling them how they would do this and see that. It would be very exciting. They had not yet told their children that when this wondrous vacation was over, they would not be going home.

Our leaving Israel was a complicated matter so Willi and I thought it best not to tell the children we would not be returning until after we were in Europe.

Lunch with Naomi
1999

They loved their daughter, but both Kati and Willi had to admit that Naomi had always been a headstrong child. She wasn't the sort to have tantrums, mind you, but she had been a bossy little girl who did exactly what she wanted.

Not unlike her mother.

Willi, what do you mean by that?

Kati, I don't think headstrong is necessarily a bad characteristic.

Sometimes Kati felt a little guilty and thought maybe Naomi was so willful because of all the extra attention she had given Ronnie. He had been such a sickly baby who needed surgery, then the polio, and after that, he had terrible asthma until they left Israel. Naomi, on the other hand, had always been so healthy, so easy next to Ronnie.

I'll never forget that one night in Israel I went into Ronnie's room to check on him and Naomi is lying in bed next to him. Naomi, I said, what are you doing? She looked at me and said she wanted to catch Ronnie's cold.

Many times, Kati would tell Willi that maybe getting less attention was the reason Naomi wouldn't listen like Ronnie. Look at Ronnie. When the Forest Hills school told them their son was bored and needed more, they sent Ronnie to a private school. He didn't like it that he had to wear a jacket and tie, but he wore them without too much complaining.

Then again, maybe the problem was that Kati and Willi had been too strict with Naomi—they had been much stricter with her than with Ronnie. And when Naomi was young she was forever asking questions they would not answer.

"What is Auschwitz?" Naomi came home asking Kati soon after starting school in America.

"Naomi, where did you hear this?"

"Some kids at school."

"Auschwitz was a terrible place. Naomi, don't you have homework?"

This book, as you know, was Ronnie's idea; Naomi has offered no opinion, one way or the other. Still, we would like you to meet her. We will have you to lunch with Naomi. Have we ever mentioned that you remind us of Naomi? We mean this in the most complimentary way. Naomi is a smart and independent woman, a psychotherapist with a successful practice.

"Oh, why do you always do this?"

"Do what, Naomi?"

"Use so much salad oil."

"Maybe it's a European thing. It's how your father and I like it."

"There's no reason to drown in it."

"Maybe you would like something else?"

"No. No. It's too late. You already ruined it."

"It's not too late. I can fix it."

"Naomi, this is the writer your mother and I wanted you to meet."

While Kati is in the kitchen, Naomi asks the writer about her background. The writer mentions graduate school in anthropology, a Master's essay on emotions, specifically shame. Naomi finds that interesting.

"This is all about shame, you know."

One Month Later

Our leaving Israel was complicated, so complicated Willi and I didn't tell the children we would not be returning until after we were in Europe.

Kati, Naomi resented our leaving Israel. She mentioned this a few weeks ago when we had lunch.

Willi, what did Naomi say? I don't remember this.

You must have been in the kitchen. I had said that one of the reasons we left was because we didn't want the children in the army. Naomi said she resented that we didn't give her the chance to serve, that she wanted to serve. We took that away from her.

I'm not surprised Naomi resents this. She is a strong woman. But I'd rather have her alive and resenting than dead, a hero. I do feel guilty

over Naomi for some things, but not keeping her from the army. She had many friends in Israel and thirteen is a difficult age to move. When we left Israel, the children thought we were going on a European vacation and we did not tell them right away that we were not going back to Israel. It was not an easy thing to tell them. Naomi had many friends in Israel. She was also very involved with gymnastics; she was so good that her coach was training her at the Olympic level. Ronnie, like my brother Alexander, had always loved animals, and we had to leave his dog behind. When you go to California to meet with Ronnie, you will see on his desk an urn.

Those are the ashes of Danny, the Great Dane we had later on when we came to America.

There are things about leaving Israel that I will feel guilty about as concerns the children. But I will never feel guilty over preventing them from serving in the army. We had too many friends whose children were killed.

Our children do not know war. We did not; do not want them to ever know war.

Kati on Survivors
2000

People make certain assumptions about survivors. We have this particular guilt. A need to achieve because of shame. We do this or that to our children. I resent people making certain assumptions based solely on my being a survivor. All survivors are individuals with their own feelings. You talk to a hundred different survivors and you'll get a hundred different versions of what happened. There are survivors my age who have lived their entire lives in sadness. You talk to them and the Holocaust will sound different. It's especially sad for people who lost children. I am lucky. I've had much happiness in my life so I can talk about it with more easy feelings, not as heavy a heart.

There are certain things about me that I know come from my being a survivor. After the War, I told Willi I would never set foot in Germany again—and I never have. Still today, I walk down the streets of Manhattan and when I hear German tourists speaking, I get goose bumps. I know it's irrational—these people are sightseeing—but I can't control this reaction.

Ronnie especially gets upset with me over this sort of behavior. Why not go to Germany? Not all Germans are Nazis. Ronnie has never experienced the hatred—and I hope he never does. In fact, he's never experienced any sort of prejudice over being a Jew, and he holds no prejudice for anyone else. Willi and I raised the children to be this way, not to like or dislike people because of who they are, because they might be this or that. We did this because we know what hatred can do. What's important is that you look into someone's heart.

I know that people think that what we survivors have to say is irrelevant, that this couldn't possibly happen again. And I know people think I'm out of touch when I say this type of hatred still exists. But it does still exist—Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and Africa—wherever people hate people because of what they are. It's not a hatred that's only for Jews. It can exist among any group of people. We must guard against it everyday because it's always just under the surface, always ready to come out. Even today when I go to Europe I still feel the hatred. We were out in public and some friends suggested that I do not wear my Star of David that I have on a necklace so people could see it. These are the same friends who have a Christmas tree every year just so their children won't be singled out.

I know younger people find this sort of talk tiring. I know they think it could never happen again. You know, I hope they are right.

No Uncomfortable Silence

1999

Excuse me, but does the music bother you? It doesn't interfere with your tape recorder? Good. I meant to ask you this the last time you were here. Kati and I always have music playing in the background. We love music, especially from the forties and fifties. We find it relaxes us to always have it playing.

Hakshara
Winter 1946

They called it hakshara, the agricultural training provided to Jews hoping to immigrate to Palestine. In early winter of 1945, Lilly Salcer had decided there would be no life for her in Czechoslovakia, and went to a hakshara camp near Bratislava. In this camp, she would prepare emotionally and physically for her new life, and await the transport that would take her, illegally, to her new land. Aliyah, it was called, this clandestine immigration. The Haganah, the underground military organization of pre-state Israel, would arrange everything.

I understood why my sister wanted to go to Palestine. You cannot imagine what it was like after the War to come home to no one, and to find the people around you didn't even care if you were alive or dead. You still felt the hatred for the Jew. No one wants you. Then here come these Jews who say you belong with us. You are a Jew. There is a land for you. Come to Palestine. We will take you.

When Lilly had first mentioned that she had been in contact with the Haganah, Kati and Willi also considered Palestine. For one thing, Willi told Kati, he already had relatives there. They would not be completely among strangers.

My father's younger brother Erno, who everyone called a schlepper—you know, a kind of guy who didn't seem to go around with much thought—left for Palestine after Hitler came into Czechoslovakia in 1939. He went with his wife Jolie as well as his sisters, my Aunt Ibolya, and my Aunt Szeren and her husband. Erno had decided that he wasn't going to wait around for things to get better. Indeed, the family schlepper ended up being the smartest of us all.

Willi, however, had resisted going to Palestine.

Jews were encouraged to work the land. I was an engineer. There would be no way for me to make a living. Palestine was also an extremely volatile situation. The British didn't want the Jews there. The Arabs didn't want the Jews. I wanted to get on with my life and away from war. I wanted to go to America.

When Kati and Willi arrive at the hakshara camp, they make no secret of the fact that Willi is an escapee from the Czech army and this is their reason for suddenly showing up. Whatever their reason, they are welcomed and put to work.

While I was in the camp I even worked in the quarry. They had women and girls work the quarry. I did a good job—and didn't break one fingernail. After the War, I had started wearing my fingernails long and with bright red nail polish, just like my mother. Still do. I can do anything with these nails.

Kati and Willi are told that it was impossible to say exactly when they would be going to Palestine. It could be on a day's notice. Or months. They had to be ready. Even though it had not been their first choice, by spring of 1946, they had come to look forward to Palestine.

Willi and I became absolutely committed to a new life in Palestine. 100% committed.

Still, Willi worried. What would he do in Palestine? It was more than not being able to work as an engineer. The togetherness in the camp had made him realize that he didn't want to live in a kibbutz. Kati felt the same.

Like Willi, I admired and respected those who wanted to work the land and live in a kibbutz. However, after always doing things in groups in the Nazi camps, I wanted to live on our own.

In the early summer of 1946, word comes to the camp that a mass grave has been unearthed in Hungary. Kati's father is among the dead, and will be exhumed for burial in the Budapest Jewish Cemetery.

Kati insists that she must go for the burial. It is the only grave for her family. Because he is a fugitive from the Czech army Willi cannot accompany her, and does not want her to go alone. He's worried that she does not have the proper papers to cross the border. If she is stopped, there could be problems. Plus, they don't know when the

transport will be ready. It could be any day, and if Kati is not here, everyone will leave without her.

She will not go alone. There's another girl in the camp whose father is among the dead and she will accompany Kati to Budapest. If Kati misses the transport, Willi should go to Palestine and she will find her way there.

Before Kati leaves, Willi gives her the gold coins left from his smuggling.

When the border guards detained me, they took all my gold coins and checked all my favorite parts.

Kati is in a jail cell, losing hope, when a guard approaches her.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Yes, the guard did use the "nice girl" line. I told him how he could get word to Willi, and Willi was there the next day with a lawyer. They got me out of jail and back to the camp. The next day the orders came that we were leaving for Palestine. If that guard hadn't let Willi know where I was, if I had been detained another 24 hours, I would have missed it.

The next day, Kati and Willi along with the other Jews from the camp, about one hundred young people, are taken to Prague by train. There they meet up with other Jews from hakshara camps all over Czechoslovakia, six hundred survivors seeking a new life in Palestine. All they have to do is illegally cross the borders between Prague and Antwerp, then sail through the British blockades. Compared to what they had been though, Kati says it's a piece of cake.

How Much for Daddy and His Watch?
2000

A letter came for Kati. At my urging she had applied for reparations from the Hungarian government. Hungary has been eager to join the modern European community—NATO and the European Union—and for this reason they looked to tidy up their Fascist past and make reparations to survivors before they are all gone. It was the Hungarians and not the Germans who murdered Kati's father. He was put into a camp in Hungary for doctors and pharmacists. On October 19, 1944, they were all killed—machine-gunned—in a mass grave they had dug themselves; this has all been documented.

In addition to reparations for her father's loss of life, Kati applied for damages for the loss of his property—the family home and pharmacy. When Hungary's borders were changed after the Munich Agreement, her father's properties were no longer in Czechoslovakia but in Hungary, so it was the Hungarians who had confiscated the properties.

This letter details the judgment for Kati—here is the official translator's copy. They reject all claims for the house and pharmacy for two reasons: Kati does not have a receipt and they say Hungary is not responsible for these properties as they are outside the borders of Hungary as per the Versailles agreement.

When Kati's father was taken they took his gold watch. This is documented in their records; they kept very concise records.

For the gold watch, Kati was awarded the equivalent of $6.50 American. For the death of her father, the equivalent of $4.00 American. The total award for the loss of his life and properties is $10.50.

That's right, a total of $10.50.

I have decided not to tell Kati about this letter. It will only upset her. Here is a copy of the official translation.

MUNICIPAL RESTITUTION OFFICE
116 BUDAPEST, HAUSZMANN A.U.I.
NO.: 21-4008041-0380742/2000. (0)
Official in charge: Jozsef Eros

In response to the claim submitted by KATARINA SALCER nee KATARINA KELLNER (born in PELSOC, date of birth: 4/13/1927, mother's name: HELEN KELLNER) residing at xxx East 72nd St. Apt. xx, New York, NY 10021, for restitutionary damages in the matter of her father, the late Laszlo Kellner, who suffered loss of life and financial losses as a result of illegal, politically motivated actions by the Hungarian authorities. I render the following

JUDGMENT:

I partially accept the claim and I grant restitutionary damages in the amount of HUF 1,000.00. I reject the claim for damages over this amount.

I have instructed the local branch office of KERESKEDELMI BANK to issue a coupon with a face value of HUF 1,000 for the above-named person.

The present judgment may be appealed within a period of 15 days.

REASONS FOR JUDGMENT:

On the basis of the claim submitted to me and of the attached documents I found the following facts:

LASZLO KELLNER (born in ROZSNYO, date of birth: 04/08/1899) lost his life as a member of a forced labor brigade on October 19, 1944 due to politically motivated action on the part of the Hungarian authorities.

I am accepting the claim of loss of life for political reasons, as specified in regulation no. KKJ 22/3386445-5149708/3-1998 of April 19, 1998.

The claimant also submitted a claim for loss of property in connection with the loss of life with regard to the following assets:

1. An apartment located at Fo u. 53, Pelsoc, the property of LASZLO KELLNER (born on 04/08/1899).
2. A pharmacy located at Fo u 53, Pelsoc, the property of LASZLO KELLER (born on 04/08/1899).
3. Jewlry, the property of LASZLO KELLNER (born on 04/08/1899), confiscated: 1 chain, 16 carat gold, weighing 14 g.
4. Various items of jewelry and objects of art (paintings) owned by LASZLO KELLNER (born on 04/08/1899).

HUF 1,000 equals approx. USD 4,00 (translator)

KATARINA SALCER (KATARINA KELLNER) submitted her claim under no. R. 4008041.

The claim is partially valid.

The claimant is entitled to damages in accordance with law no. XXV of 1991 for material losses as described in paragraph no. 10 in connection with paragraphs nos., 2, 2/A, 2/B and 3 of law no. XXXII of 1992 modified by law no. XXIX of 1997.

Based on the facts I found I state the following:

Re no. 3 of the above, LASZLO KELLNER is entitled to damages in the amount of HUF 1,400 for confiscation of valuables, for which no receipt can be produced.

Re nos. 1-2 of the above, I reject the claim. The loss suffered by the claimant is not covered by the laws specified above, as the lost property is located outside the borders of Hungary as per the treaty of Versailles, therefore the claimant is not entitled to damages in accordance with paragraph 2 (1) of law no. XXIV of 1992.

Re. No. 4 of the above, I reject the claim, I found that the items described there do not fall under the scope of paragraph 3 of law no. XXIV of 1992, as it is not proven that the said items were confiscated.

I specified the amount of damages in accordance with various regulations and rounded the amount as per various other regulations (nos. indicated); the claimant, as the offspring of the late LASZLO KELLNER is entitled to receive the full amount of the damages granted here.

(References to various laws and regulations)

Dated in Budapest, on July 4, 2000

Seal, signature

Recurring Dream
Since 1944

It was a recurring dream, always the same.

Kati is a young girl and sees her mother wearing the black hat with red cherries that Ilona Kellner had worn when she visited her daughter at school in Budapest. It was a hat so beautiful that the girls in the Forstner dormitory said it was the most gorgeous hat in the entire world.

In the dream, Kati's mother is walking down a street and Kati is so excited to see her that she runs straight to her crying, "Mommy! Mommy!" But as Kati gets closer, the street fills with women wearing the same black hat with big red cherries. Frantic, Kati runs from woman to woman, grabbing as many cherries as she can, tearing them from the hats, cradling cherries in her arms. Suddenly a young boy appears and Kati yells to him. Stop! She wants him to have the cherries. She throws the cherries towards him. Here, catch!

But the boy disappears. He always disappears.

This is when Kati wakes up.

In the dream I don't know if the young boy is Willi, but now the boy looks to me like Ronnie. I've had this dream for many years.

After the War, whenever Willi would take Kati to Budapest, she would scour the milliner shops and department stores for a black hat with cherries. She never found anything quite like it. There was always something wrong. The brim was too low. There were not enough cherries. Always something.

Maybe, she told Willi, there were no more black hats with cherries.

The Jewish Soldier
July 1946

They were at a cafe in Paris. It should have been a joyous occasion—a luxurious lunch, such a special event on their Aliyah Bet journey—but Willi was distracted. Kati asked him what was wrong. Willi lied and said it was the salad. Cucumbers and sour cream—he had never heard of such a combination. These two things cannot go together.

"Willi, it's good for you to try new things. Always meat and potatoes is not a good thing. Who knows, you may even develop a taste for vegetables."

Where I was from, real men didn't eat vegetables, and I was a macho European guy. I pretty much remained this way until I took EST in the seventies.

"Oranges," he said.

In Palestine, there would be so many oranges that they will make juice and throw the rest away. Squeeze them and just throw them away.

"Oranges, my foot. If you don't stop looking at those French women with the purple hair we'll miss our train."

"I was curious from a scientific point of view how they do this."

"I'll give you a scientific point of view."

It was Kati's and my first time in Paris. Our train had made a stopover on the way to Belgium where we would meet up with the Aliyah Bet ship that would take us to Palestine.

Yes, the same kind of ship as in the movie Exodus, except we had no Paul Newman.

I must admit the French had some strange habits. But all in all, the purple hair didn't look so bad.

Before they go back to the train, Willi suggests Kati look in one of the fancy Paris shops for a black hat with cherries. No. Not now. This is not the time.

Back on the train, Willi notices Kati's tears

"Six hundred, would you say, Kati?"

"Willi, what are you talking about? Six hundred what?"

"Six hundred Jews on this train."

"Willi, you know I have no head for numbers. Why are you asking me?"

"I thought it was interesting."

"Okay, maybe five hundred. I think there are maybe five hundred."

"No. No, Kati. If anything it's closer to seven hundred."

"Five hundred, seven hundred. Willi, what does it matter? You get way too involved with such questions. There are other things in life to consider."

"Kati, I promise you that one day I will bring you back to see your father's grave."

With this, they settle into their journey.

From Paris, they proceed to Belgium. At the border, the train stops as it had at every such crossing. Their leader, a middle aged woman who was a member of the Haganah, gets off and has a discussion with the border guards, the same discussion she's had at every border from Prague to Paris.

"How much to let these Jews through?"

It's not as if anyone wanted Jews to stay. I told Kati they were probably glad to see us go. Still, they made us pay a price for the privilege of leaving Europe. I admired the woman from the Haganah who was the leader of our train. She was in her fifties, a remarkable woman. She would haggle with the border guards, sometimes for an hour. She always got us through.

When the train reaches Antwerp, its final destination, everyone onboard is taken to a castle.

I could not believe it when I saw the castle. I had been expecting tents. But they had to keep us hidden, and the Haganah had secured the use of a castle. Don't ask me how. They did not tell us the circumstances. I laughed and told Willi I was a real Jewish princess.

The Haganah leaders announce that they can name their ship, and Willi takes part in what becomes a long and somewhat heated discussion.

This was what they called an Aliyah Bet ship. Aliyah Bet literally meant, "rising up to Palestine." These ships brought Jew after Jew to Palestine from Europe, regardless of what the British said. Since 1939, the British had a quota on the number of Jews allowed in, and the Jews disregarded it. These ships were usually rented or purchased for a great deal of money, then renamed for the voyage. It was not a simple thing, agreeing on a name. You know how it is. You put two Jews together, and you get three opinions.

Finally, they agree on a name: Chajal Haivri, The Jewish Soldier.

After a few weeks the ship is ready. Before boarding, everyone hands in the false identification documents they'd been given in Prague. Remember, now you are homeless. If the ship is stopped, you have no papers. If they do not know who you are and where you are from, they cannot send you back.

The Jewish Soldier is a Greek cargo vessel that Willi figures was designed to normally hold maybe twenty people at most in addition to its freight. Doing some quick estimating, he guesses that the six hundred Jews would make up ten percent of the ship's weight, a precarious situation, as this payload was living and breathing and not boxed and roped down like the usual cargo. When Willi goes down below, he tells Kati that maybe it can hold three hundred people, at best.

Willi's estimation was right. We were packed together like sardines. We did not have proper bathroom facilities or water to wash. But we were happy, thrilled to be going to a new life. You must remember that most of us had been through a lot worse.

The ship leaves Antwerp and sails through the Straits of Dover, heading south. After a few days, everyone is hot, tired, hungry, dirty and thirsty.

I kept the life in Kati and Lilly by telling them stories, how we will have oranges. I told them this story, over and over.

As they near Gibraltar, they spot a British vessel. Everyone is ordered below deck. Luckily the British pass by without stopping.

Usually the British recognized these kinds of ships, but for some reason they didn't recognize ours. The telltale sign was that these ships ran slow and low in the water because they were so overloaded. The British would follow these ships and physically prevent them in some way from going to Palestine. They would say this is an Aliyah Bet ship there are Jews here.

From Gibraltar, the Jewish Soldier enters the Mediterranean. Because the boat is so heavily loaded, a trip that normally takes two or three days lasts more than two weeks. About thirty miles from Haifa Harbor, word comes that there is a curfew onshore.

There was an active underground, many different Jewish groups who wanted the British out. Some attacked and killed British soldiers. Jews were killed. Everyday something happened. As a consequence, there was a curfew in Palestine. Nothing moved after dark. You couldn't go out on the street or they'd shoot you. Anyone who was outside was assumed to be some kind of terrorist. The British didn't ask questions, they just shot.

The dozen Greek sailors manning the ship refuse to go on when they learn of the curfew. They know if they proceed the British will seize the ship and everything on it. With help from passengers, the Greeks are tied up and put in the ship's hold. The three Haganah leaders steer the ship into the harbor. By the time the British pull alongside, everyone except the Greek crew and the Haganah leaders are standing on the deck, Jew to Jew.

I stood between Willi and Lilly. We did not move. No one moved. We just stood there and stared at the British. We refused to move and let them on the ship. You could tell that they did not know what to do with us. They looked so frustrated. Finally, they stopped trying to get onboard.

When the British leave, everyone remains on deck. They stand for most of the night, until the Haganah leaders dive off the boat and swim to shore. The next morning when the British try to board the ship, no one stops them.

The British start questioning, "Who are you? Where are you from?"

No one answers. The visibly angry British sailors leave the ship sitting in the harbor.

So we sat. Time went by slowly. It was very hot. Sometimes too many people walked to one side and the boat would start to tip. I worried we would be sent somewhere other than Palestine, but I didn't mention this to Kati and Lilly. Physically, we were okay. The Jewish Agency brought us various supplies and food.

"Kati, what is this?"

"Willi, it's a tomato."

Willi knew it was a tomato. He had seen tomatoes before. But can you eat it without cooking? He had never heard of this, eating raw tomatoes. It cannot be good for you. Kati bites, fearlessly, into the tomato, and the sweet taste startles her. The juice runs down her face.

Willi revels at this woman he had married, and takes a bite, "Not bad."

Three weeks after entering Haifa Harbor, in mid-August of 1946, the British come onboard and escort everyone off the ship. Before they are loaded onto buses for the detention camp, Kati and Willi kiss the ground.

The Jewish Soldier will be the last of the captured Aliyah Bet ships allowed into Haifa. From then on, all such ships will be sent to Cyprus.

Still Waiting
November 1946

Three months after they had landed in Palestine, Kati, Willi and Lilly are still in Atlit, the detention camp outside of Haifa used by the British to detain illegal immigrants. As far as camps are concerned, they'd certainly seen worse. What bothers Willi most is that he has been separated from his wife and sister.

Atlit had two sections—one for men and one for women—each encircled by high fences topped with barbed wire, with the British in between, always watching, looking down from wooden platforms. It bothered me, perhaps even more than Kati as she had Lilly with her, that we had been separated. I considered this an insult. Why did they separate families? They didn't respect us as people. And I didn't like being constantly watched by the British. They looked at us like we were criminals.

The British are in charge of security for the camp, but it's the Jewish Agency that decides who enters Palestine—and when.

The British did not care which Jews were selected—for them only the quota mattered. The Jewish Agency interviewed us and decided who would be let in—and when. Kati and I wondered why they asked so many questions until we learned that among the Jewish Soldier passengers they had found an SS man.

I couldn't believe this guy thought he could pass. He had an SS tattoo. That's how they could tell. The SS had these tattoos.

A person could be detained in Atlit for up to two years without formal charges. They did this to Ari. He was a Christian from Slovakia who'd grown up among Jews and had Jewish friends. The guy liked Jews, so after the War he decided to come to Palestine. He and I became friendly during the voyage. The Jewish Agency could not believe that a Christian would choose to live among Jews. They detained him for two years before releasing him. Kati and I testified on his behalf. No, I don't remember his Christian name. I had always called him Ari. He and I remained friends after Atlit, although I didn't see him often. He became one of Israel's top spies. Unfortunately, the Egyptians executed him in the fifties.

Willi's interview with the Jewish Agency goes smoothly. He provides a chronological account of his War years. Labor Battalion. Mauthausen. Gunskirchen.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes."

"Sign here."

Kati's interview is more complicated.

"How long were you in Auschwitz?"

"About six weeks I think."

"What was your number?"

"I didn't have a number."

"No tattoo with a number?"

" I was never tattooed."

"You were in Auschwitz and never tattooed?"

Back in Europe, no one asked what had happened. In Atlit they asked. I cannot describe what it was like to finally talk about it, and then think you are not quite believed, that someone thinks that maybe you're a hysterical girl who doesn't remember things right. Or worse, you're lying. It was around 1960, the time of the trial of Eichmann, when there were suddenly all sorts of articles on the camps that I read why I had not been tattooed. I had been selected for Vernichtenschlagger—which means to be destroyed. I was put in a barrack with women and girls considered possible surplus—it was a question whether they would be gassed or put to work. This is why no tattoo—they didn't tattoo those who went to the gas. Waste of ink, I suppose. After Atlit I protected myself by never talking about what had happened. It made it worse to talk about it and have someone not quite believe you.

To keep busy during the long days in Atlit, Kati helps the women with young children, while Willi mostly plays volleyball. For the men there are teams according to countries; Willi is on the Slovak team. They even play against the British.

Willi I remember that there was also a lot of hanky panky at night.

No, the hanky panky had been in the day, during the hours the women visited. We had set up tents and covered them with blankets to give people privacy.

After dark, Willi joins the group that flies Star of David on the flagpole in the middle of the men's camp. Every evening, they take down the British flag and put up the Star of David. When the British come to take it down, they resist.

> *There were fistfights, but they never held guns on us. This is pretty much how we spent our evenings.*

There's the question of where they will go once they leave Atlit. Willi and Lilly have relatives in Palestine but there had not been any recent contact. Lilly had written after the War but never received a reply. In Atlit, the Jewish Agency informs them that they had located their Aunt Ibolya. She lives in Tel Aviv and is expecting them.

Ibolya, the youngest sister of Willi's father, is only seven years older than Willi. The last time he saw her she was a beautiful girl of twenty-two. She had married a man called Blondy, a tailor, shortly after she came to Palestine in 1939. When Willi lived in the hotel in Hnusta with his father, Ibolya had also lived there. She had always been kind to Willi, and he tells Kati he is certain his Aunt will make a special place in her heart for his young wife.

On the day they leave Atlit, the Jewish Agency gives Kati and Willi their start for a new life: fourteen pounds, a ticket to retrieve two metal cots from their office in Tel Aviv, and along with Lilly, a ride to Aunt Ibolya's.

Canary Girl Documented
2000

Every day except Sunday, Kati and a group of Jewish women and girls from the small labor camp in the German village of Lichtenau were sent to work in an underground munitions factory. From the camp, they'd march for an hour, regardless of the weather, to a waiting cattle car that took them to a forest. Once there, the girls were led through a hidden tunnel that led them down to a munitions factory. It was a massive factory where thousands of people, mostly Polish male political prisoners, worked making bombs.

For this book, Kati and Willi were interviewed three days a week, six hours a day, together and alone, over a six-month period. Every time, Kati portrayed the underground factory in the same way. She never wavered in her description, or in the belief that it existed. But Willi did.

Interviewed together one day, he wondered how it could be that there existed completely undisturbed grass and trees atop a vast military industrial complex? This didn't make sense. And how could Kati labor in this place for eight months and not know the name of this factory, even the village where it had been located? Kati was only sixteen when this happened, and she had been sent to Lichtenau after six weeks in Auschwitz. Perhaps her having been a young girl combined with the tragedy of her circumstances were causing her to misremember. Willi's own sister Lilly had also been sent to Lichtenau from Auschwitz. Why is it Lilly had never been in an underground munitions factory?

Kati could not explain why she didn't know the name of the factory or the village, except to say that the guards had not mentioned it, and the Jewish women and girls were not allowed to speak to each other let alone ask the Polish male workers. If Willi questioned this, all Kati had to say was that she knew where she had been, and that was enough for her.

In doing background research, I initially found no reference to the Lichtenau camp or the munitions factory. It was even suggested that perhaps this was traumatized memory. But something said Kati was not misremembering. When she spoke, she could see, smell—even taste the factory.

On an off chance, I asked Dr. William Menke, a Professor of Geology at Columbia University: "If there were thousands of people working underground somewhere in the vicinity of Leipzig, wouldn't there be some natural formation or a mine that geologists would know about?"

Menke said he would look into it. He told his wife, geologist Dr. Dallas Abbott, that I was working on a book about survivors. She asked if I'd be interested in reading the memoir of a woman, an old family friend from Maine. This woman, Judith Isaacson, was a Hungarian Jew who had been in Auschwitz. Now retired, Dr. Isaacson had been a Dean and Mathematics Professor at Bates College. She settled in Maine after marrying an American Army Captain she had met shortly after liberation. Her memoir was entitled "Seed of Sarah". I thanked Dallas and said yes, I would like to read it.

When I received the book, I randomly flipped open to a page. There it was. The Lichtenau camp. The munitions factory. Judith Magyar Isaacson, like Katarina Kellner Salcer, had been in Auschwitz and sent to Lichtenau.

I immediately called Dr. Isaacson in Maine.

In 1983, Judith Isaacson visited the site of the Lichtenau camp to obtain information for her own memoir. Like Kati, she did not know the name of the factory or its location. But like Kati, she knew she had been there.

When Dr. Isaacson visited Lichtenau, it was still part of East Germany. Although local residents were less than helpful, she still managed to locate the old barracks at the Lichtenau camp and some buildings associated with the factory by the railroad tracks—but not the munitions factory itself.

She asked locals about the factory.

They said they didn't know what she was talking about.

The police told her to stop asking.

Judith Isaacson was disappointed that she had not been able to document her memories. Then years after this visit, someone anonymously mailed her from Budapest a copy of an obscure scholarly paper by Dieter Vaupel, a German history teacher. This paper was specifically about the one thousand Hungarian and Czech girls sent to Lichtenau from Auschwitz.

Dieter Vaupel first started researching Lichtenau in the early nineteen eighties while working nearby as a high school history teacher. He actively involved his students in his research. He thought it important that they should know the real history of their village. When asked why he, a Gentile, had published the study about these women and

girls, especially in light of possible ostracism, Vaupel simply says, "It was the right thing to do."

In August of 1944 a call came into Auschwitz from the Fabric Hessisch-Lichtenau der GmbH zur Verwertung chemische Erzeugnisse. This subsidiary of the Dynamit Nobel Company was one of the three largest munitions factories in Germany.

The factory was in dire need of workers. They no longer had a steady supply of male political prisoners, so they were willing to settle for Jewish women and girls. Cheap, expendable labor—some cost efficiency expert figured they could work them to death, and then request more from Auschwitz. The munitions factory would even pay the SS for their labor. A win-win.

They requested one thousand Jewesses to be sent from Auschwitz to Lichtenau. Immediately. Kati and Judith were both saved from the gas to help meet this quota.

On that August day in Auschwitz, the line for the gas was moving efficiently until the air raid sounded; then everything stopped. Afterwards, the guards counted out girls in groups of ten and put them on another line. The guard didn't say for what. When they put Kati on the cattle car, she thought they had run out of the killing gas and perhaps they would simply ride everyone around in the heat until they were dead.

Kati and the other Jewish women and girls were brought to a small labor camp on the outskirts of the German village of Lichtenau. The underground munitions factory was further away in Furstenhagen, an area that would be renamed Hirschhagen after the War. In Hirschhagen, they would cover up the munitions factory and deny that the girls of Lichtenau had ever existed.

There were as many as eight thousand workers in this factory at one time. The one thousand Hungarian and Czech women and girls, however, were the only concentration camp inmates ever assigned to work there. Unlike the other workers, they were not provided with protective masks or gloves to wear while handling poisonous materials.

The greenish-yellow substance Kati had poured from a bucket into shells has been identified as Pikrin, a highly toxic chemical that causes severe lung and liver damage. Pikrin is the reason Kati's friend Eva Fisher had turned yellow before she died. In Lichtenau, they had a nickname for the unlucky ones who handled Pikrin. They were called Kanarienvoegel—Canary Girls.

Kati had been a Canary Girl.

Handling Pikrin was the worst possible job assignment. Judith Isaacson was sorry to hear this had been Kati's work. Judith considered herself lucky that her job had been as a "horse" to pull wagons.

It is not known exactly how many of the original one thousand women sent to Lichtenau survived. Dr. Isaacson herself knows of forty, and is aware of a small group, which still meets every Monday in Budapest for coffee and cake.

In October of 1944, after the Kommandant asked for volunteers, a number of the Hungarian and Czech girls left Lichtenau. The Kommandant had announced that workers were needed at another camp, and because the work was so much easier, he was only allowing those who had a physical disability or were pregnant to transfer.

Two hundred and six volunteered.

They were sent to Auschwitz and immediately gassed.

Details of the Lichtenau camp and munitions factory, as well as the identity of the SS man from the camp who was hanged by Kati and her group after liberation, are thanks to Dr. Dieter Vaupel, now a university professor who writes about the smaller camps in Germany, and the generous help of Dr. Judith Isaacson.

Among the materials provided by Dr. Isaacson was a copy of a photograph of the SS man, but Kati declined the opportunity to see this, saying she will never forget what this man looked like.

On the Lichtenau roster, Katarina Kellner was #417.20411, and Willi's sister Lilly Salcer, #750.20768.

Meeting Aunt Ibolya
Fall 1946

It was such an emotional moment that Kati was not at all insulted when Willi's Aunt Ibolya did not notice her standing in the hallway outside the Tel Aviv apartment.

"Is that you? Willi? Lilly?"

Yes, I was a little jealous when Ibolya cried and hugged Willi and Lilly. If anything, I was sad that I wasn't knocking on the door of my own family saying hello, look at me, I am alive.

"And who is this?"

"Aunt Ibolya, this is Kati, my wife."

"No one mentioned a wife. When did this happen?"

Your Aunt Ibolya did not like me from the start.

That is not true. Ibolya liked you.

Willi, women know these things.

Okay, maybe she was not as warm as she could have been.

It was very difficult for me to be treated this way by Ibolya. I was a nice Jewish girl from a nice Jewish family. Back in the ghetto, it was my mother who thought Willi was not good enough for me.

When Willi tells his Aunt that he and Kati had married last October, Ibolya says to look at her place. See how small it is? She has no room for Willi and a wife. Lilly can stay, but Willi and Kati have to go to his Aunt Szeren's and see what she can do.

Ibolya's husband Blondy interrupts and suggests that perhaps Ibolya could offer her nephew and his wife some soup. After all, they had just come from Atlit.

Ibolya rushes into her bedroom and slams the door hard.

We stood in the hallway listening to Willi's Aunt yelling at Blondy for having invited company to dinner without asking her first. I was so surprised by Ibolya's reaction that I didn't know what to do.

Kati and I would have left immediately except we didn't know where my Aunt Szeren and her husband lived.

While they eat, no one speaks of Auschwitz or Mauthausen, the Aliyah Bet journey or Atlit. Willi mentions that his cousin Micu, another nephew to Ibolya, had survived the War, but doesn't say that he and Micu had been in the camps together.

Blondy asks Willi about his future, and proudly, Willi tells his plans. Since there is no industry here, Willi was thinking he would start something in the manufacturing field. One can do anything. There is no mortal danger here like in Europe.

Blondy laughs. The British had made sure no industry developed here. There are diamond cutters, some retails shops, but that is about it. Blondy tells Willi he's a dreamer who thinks he can outdo all the Jews who have been here for years. If Willi is lucky, maybe Blondy can use his connections as a tailor to secure him a job in a laundry.

This is when Kati, who has been quiet, speaks up, "Willi is not a dreamer. You will see. One day he will do great things in this country."

I was so angry when Blondy laughed at Willi. We left and walked to Szeren's. I know this might sound a little mean, and I do not intend it that way, but Szeren was the homeliest woman I had ever met. I was surprised she was so homely since Ibolya was such a beautiful woman. When Willi introduced me, Szeren gave me a big hug and told us we could stay with her as long as we needed. In all my life, I will never forget Szeren's kindness. The homeliest was the most beautiful of all.

My Aunt Szeren's husband Miklos was a good looking fellow, but he drank. He was not a nasty drunk, however. He and Szeren loved each other and were happy together. He just had this weakness, drinking throughout the day. One thing I would like to add. Blondy's comments only strengthened my conviction to do well. I always found it interesting that ten years later Blondy came to me. At his request, I opened a wholesale outlet in Tel Aviv and gave him an exclusive area contract for products from my rubber factory. I must say it gave me great satisfaction doing this.

Cousin Micu
Summer 1944

After a week in Plesivec's ghetto, Willi was rounded up and taken with a group of young men to Hajdunanash in eastern Hungary. Here Willi hauled concrete sacks to build an airstrip, and developed such a rage that he would lash out without thinking. Willi was affected to such an extreme that he was filled with an anger he could hardly control. If he were waiting in a food line and someone cursed or simply looked at him the wrong way, he might hit them. Sometimes Willi's reaction to fellow Jews who simply mentioned family was to hit them.

One day Willi beat up a kid from Roznava so badly they put him in the infirmary. Willi was very sorry; what upset him most was that this kid had been a friend.

I don't remember what he said. It was probably something about my mother, and not necessarily something negative. He may have simply mentioned her name. This rage was not rational; at the slightest provocation, I would react like a caged wild animal. As punishment for beating the kid from Roznava, I had to work a 24-hour shift, but still I had this rage in me.

When the Hungarian Army officer came to the airstrip looking for Jews who knew about motor repair, Willi raised his hand, thinking that anything was better than hauling concrete sacks like a mule. The practical labs at the Industrial and Technical College had taught him to fix any engine and Willi easily passed the test. He was transferred to a Jewish Labor Battalion Mobile Unit stationed near Hungary's border with Romania, the Russian Front.

The Hungarian Labor Battalion was an anomaly as far as Jews were concerned; I don't think anything like this existed in the rest of Europe. We were under the control of the Hungarian Army and ostensibly part of the army. There were different Labor Battalion units and some were better than others in terms of the type of work and the treatment of Jews. Some of the units purposely worked Jews to death. In the Mobile Unit, I was fed better food. The work hours, though long, were not as harsh. This was because they needed my skills. The Hungarian soldiers who accompanied me when I fixed vehicles were technically in charge of me, but since they didn't know anything about vehicle repair,

they became my helpers. It was a strange situation considering they were there to guard me.

In the Mobile Unit, Willi gained better control of his rage, but people knew to stay clear and not provoke him. It was his cousin Micu showing up that made all the difference in Willi's mental attitude.

Willi could not believe it that summer of 1944 when a Hungarian army truck drove up with Micu Freedman at the wheel.

"Micu, what are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?"

Micu Freedman was the son of Armin Freedman and Regine, a younger sister of Willi's father. When Willi lived in Tornalja, the Freedman family lived in nearby St. Cloud, a small village two miles away. As a boy, Willi had loved visiting and playing with his cousins Micu, Margaret and Katherine.

His Aunt Regine was very kind and Willi liked Uncle Armin a lot. From what Willi could tell, Armin Freedman practically owned St. Cloud: the bar, bowling alley, playground and supermarket were all his. Willi would visit on Saturdays and go with the family to temple. Every child who behaved was promised an ice cream, courtesy of Mr. Freedman. After the service, there would be a hundred kids standing in line for a cone. Uncle Armin paid for each and every one.

Here is a photograph of my father and Armin Freeman that my cousin Margaret gave me this after the War. They are walking down a street in St. Cloud.

PHOTO

Armin Freedman and Lajos Salcer

In the 1930's when cars were a rarity, Armin Freedman had two. At the age of thirteen, his son Micu drove. Micu was about two years older than Willi, and they were great friends. Micu was an excellent driver, and would take Willi on many wonderful rides.

I was with Micu through the Labor Battalion, death marches and concentration camps. I don't think I could have made it without him. My rage wasn't as bad after I had Micu with me. I still had it, felt it all the time, but it was much more controllable. It only completely subsided

when I was in Mauthausen. Then I felt nothing. The rage returned after the camps, but not at such an extreme level. I could control it and never simply lashed out at people. I felt this rage for many years.

Two Americans, One Jeep
May 1945

In April of 1945, when orders came through that no Jewish prisoners should get into Allied hands, the few thousand still alive in Mauthausen were force-marched to smaller camps in Austria. Willi and his cousin Micu were among those who survived the forty-mile trek to Gunskirchen Lager.

Gabi Strauss was also in this group. Yes, this is the same Gabi who was in love with Kati.

Once in Gunskirchen, they were crammed into huts crowded with hundreds of men, dead and almost dead. No one spoke. No one cried. Nothing, until the commotion outside. Then, joy.

I dragged myself to the opening of the hut to see what was going on. I could not believe my eyes when an American jeep rolled in; it was obvious the Americans couldn't believe their eyes, either. I watched the Germans run and the Americans pull closer. Disbelief and disgust were on the faces of the two Americans, a black soldier and a white officer. I started crawling towards the Americans. Anyone who could move started crawling. We became delirious with joy. We yelled. We cried. We tried to touch the Americans. The Americans just stood there, looking. I had never seen a black man before. I looked at the black soldier, a very big man. The man looked at me. This man's tear was the first show of humanity I had seen in a very long time. I wanted to kiss him.

Together with his cousin Micu Freedman, Gabi Strauss and nine others, Willi left Gunskirchen for home. They walked until they came upon a small farmhouse. They told the terrified couple cowering inside that they wanted food. The couple said to take what you want. Some men took bread and lard. Willi and some others took two horses and a carriage. All twelve piled in. Willi drove them away.

An American Army truck pulled up, and an American officer said very nicely, "All of you, up in the truck."

Everyone got off the wagon and into the truck, except Willi.

A little crazy, but I had it in my head that I was going home and I wasn't going to let anyone stop me.

In broken English, Willi told the American officer, "No, home."

The officer pointed to the truck and repeated, "You go, up."

Willi didn't know enough English to argue, so he started to drive on. He didn't want the American to touch him; he knew he would collapse. Willi wanted to go home and that was that. The American took out his gun.

I knew the American was powerless—he wouldn't shoot. I could see it in his eyes. After I saw that he wouldn't kill me, I got up in the truck.

They were taken to a barn. Inside there were hundreds of dying Jews and only a few medics. Once Willi lay down, he couldn't move. A medic said Willi had typhoid fever. Since Willi was too weak to eat, the medic tried to feed him intravenously.

The medic couldn't find a vein, and finally gave up. All around people were dying. They looked to save those who had the best chance. Willi knew he had been given him up for dead. This was it, he thought. Now he was going to die. For the first time he thought he was going to die. He knew he had to do something. He told himself he had to get the medic's attention, but he could not move or speak. He told himself he had to say something or he would die.

"No. No. Come back."

I shouted until he came back. The medic couldn't find a vein, but I wouldn't let him leave. I held onto him and wouldn't let go until he found a vein. I wanted to live. I wanted to go home.

While recuperating, Willi heard that in Budapest there were still Jews alive. After a few weeks, he left the barn and headed for Budapest, dressed in the lederhosen the Americans had given him.

Yes, lederhosen. After liberation, it seemed a little ironic that I should be wandering around Europe in odd German pants. But I left the barn the Americans called a field hospital dressed in the pair of baggy lederhosen they had given me to wear.

The Seventy-First Came to Gunskirchen

This following excerpt is an eyewitness account from a booklet produced by the by the 71st Infantry of the United States Army after their May 4, 1945 liberation of Gunskirchen Lager.

Capt. J. D. Pletcher, Berwyn, Ill., of the 71st Division Headquarters and Cpl. James DeSpain, Allegan, Michigan, arrived at Gunskirchen Lager the same morning the camp was found by elements of the Division. Capt. Pletcher's account of the scenes he witnessed follows:

...Driving up to the camp in our jeep, Cpl. DeSpain and I, first knew we were approaching the camp by the hundreds of starving, half crazed inmates lining the roads, begging for food and cigarettes. Many of them had been able to get only a few hundred yards from the gate before they keeled over and died. As weak as they were, the chance to be free, the opportunity to escape was so great they couldn't resist, though it meant staggering only a few yards before death came.

Then came the next indication of the camp's nearness—the smell. There was something about the smell of Gunskirchen I shall never forget. It was strong, yes, and permeating, too. Some six hours after we left the place, six hours spent riding in a jeep, where the wind was whistling around us, we could still detect the Gunskirchen smell. It had permeated our clothing, and stayed with us.

Of all the horrors of the place, the smell, perhaps, was the most startling of all. It was a smell made up of all kinds of odors—human excreta, foul bodily odors, smoldering trash fires, German tobacco —which is a stink in itself —all mixed together in a heavy dank atmosphere, in a thick, muddy woods, where little breeze could go. The ground was pulpy throughout the camp, churned to a consistency of warm putty by the milling of thousands of feet, mud mixed with feces and urine. The smell of Gunskirchen nauseated many of the Americans who went there. It was a smell I'll never forget, completely different from anything I've ever encountered. It could almost be seen and hung over the camp like a fog of death.

As we entered the camp, the living skeletons still able to walk crowded around us and, though we wanted to drive farther into the place, the milling, pressing crowd wouldn't let us. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost every inmate was insane with hunger. Just the sight of an American brought cheers, groans and shrieks. People crowded around to touch an American, to touch the jeep, to kiss our arms—perhaps just to make sure that it was true. The people who couldn't walk crawled out toward our jeep. Those who couldn't even crawl propped themselves up on an elbow, and somehow, through all their pain and suffering, revealed through their eyes the gratitude, the joy they felt at the arrival of Americans...

...All wanted to get close enough to see and many wanted to touch us as we moved slowly on. It was like a triumphal procession with the milling crowd cheering and waving their arms in exaltation...

...I doubt if any of us who saw it will ever forget it —the smell, the hundreds of bodies that looked like caricatures of human beings, the frenzy of the thousands when they knew the Americans had arrived at last, the spark of joy in the eyes of those who lay in the ditches and whispered a prayer of thanks with their last breaths. I felt, the day I saw Gunskirchen Lager, that I finally knew what I was fighting for, what the war was all about.

You Speak a Very Pretty German
1944

It's a Sunday and Kati has been tending the cabbage and potato fields near the Lichtenau labor camp. It's hot. She's tired. When the fraulein guard asks her a question in German, Kati responds without thinking in the Viennese German she had learned as a child. Terror twists her stomach. One never knew what a guard might do if a Jew spoke a better German. The guard could become very angry and hit, kick—or worse

"How did a Jew learn to speak such a pretty German?"

"I just picked it up. It is nothing."

Her speaking German makes this particular guard a little friendlier. As Kati works the field, the guard explains that she was forced to do this work. This is not something she wanted to do. If she didn't do it, they had threatened to do something to her husband.

Kati doesn't know whether to believe the guard's story, but she knows because of her speaking German, the guard is nicer to her. When Eva Fisher dies and Kati asks if she and Magda Fisher can bury Eva, the guard tells Kati that she will see what she can do. That night the guard watches that everything is clear while Kati and Magda dig a grave and bury Eva with their bare hands.

I kept in contact with Magda after the War. She married and settled in Australia. I am very grateful that my speaking German helped Magda to give her sister a proper burial. It took us the entire night to dig the grave. We cried the entire time. When we were done, Magda said prayers.

Not Everyone Likes Newcomers
1946-1947

Willi was furious. It wasn't fair. The car had hit him from behind. After the accident, he carried the clothing in one arm and wheeled the remains of the tricycle with the other down the busy Tel Aviv street. When the owner of the laundry saw the twisted metal, he fired Willi on the spot. What else could he expect? He should have known better than to hire a newcomer. Sabon.

Not knowing his young wife suspected she might be pregnant, Willi broke the news. Even though he had only been a delivery boy, there weren't many steady jobs available. People were lucky to have anything. Now he would have to go back to day work picking oranges or shoveling coal for much less money.

Kati told her husband not to worry; he would find something, and it would be something better. Both Willi and Lilly were not meant to work in a laundry.

My sister Lilly also worked in this laundry. It's only recently that she told me that she would cry whenever she saw me pick up for a delivery. She'd remember how I'd always been a top student and tears would fill her eyes. Lilly had been in the class behind me at the Industrial and Technical College. When I'd see her in the back ironing, I would think about how she had been a brilliant mathematics student and it broke my heart.

Kati also told Willi not to take the firing too personally. They just don't like young people here. They don't like us newcomers.

There did exist a prejudice against newcomers like Willi and me. We didn't call it prejudice back then, but we knew people had certain attitudes about newcomers that weren't favorable.

Yes, I had heard this word used, sabon. It is the Hebrew name for soap. Sometimes it was used derisively by Jews who had settled in Palestine before the War towards newcomers. It was an insult referring to the Nazis making soap out of Jews. And there were also insulting questions. Why did you go like sheep? Or, why do you live? Why not my brother, sister, mother, father? You must have done something that you are alive. Did you steal bread from the mouths of other Jews?

When Kati sees the "Cleaning Girl Wanted" sign, she can think of no reason why she can't help out. Willi shouldn't have to be the only one to bring in money. If Kati gets the job, she will tell him that it's good for her to keep busy with the baby coming, better than sitting around Aunt Szeren's tiny apartment all day.

When the woman of the house answers, Kati realizes from her accent that she's a Yekke.

Yekkes were the German Jews who had immigrated to Palestine in the thirties when Hitler started making trouble in Germany. Willi and I looked at them as snobs who looked down on Jews from our part of Europe

In the perfect Viennese German Kati had learned as a child, she tells the woman that she would please like to apply for the cleaning girl position.

"I'm sorry. You do not look like a maid to me. And how can you clean with these long painted fingernails?"

"I tell you what. If you hire me, I promise you will not be sorry. And what do you have to lose if you give me a chance? You can always fire me."

When Kati tells Willi she has taken a position as a maid for a Yekke family, he has a little fun mimicking the Yekke men on construction sites. Doctors and lawyers dressed suits and hats passing along buckets as they stood in a perfect line.

"Danke shon," Willi says as he bows to his wife, thanking her for taking the job, and promising her that one day she will have her very own maid.

The German Jewish family was very good to me. They had a grown daughter but also a newborn, so it was the perfect way to learn how to care for a baby. I worked into my sixth month of pregnancy. Willi would visit during lunch and that was fine if he ate with me. And I was good for the family. I cooked delicious meals, took excellent care of their baby and kept the house spotless. I'm proud that I had been a very good maid.

Kati was in her eighth month when Willi came home to Szeren's with the good news. He had found an apartment that was opening up, one room on the third floor of a building. They could use the gold bracelet for the key money.

The bracelet was all that was left from my smuggling. Kati and I had been saving it to use as key money. There was key money to be paid to get anything. You paid key money simply for the privilege of renting. It was a one-time payment. You paid for the privilege of living there. Then you paid rent.

Willi sold the bracelet and paid fifty pounds in key money. They moved in with two metal cots from the Jewish Agency, two blankets, a night table and a tiny icebox.

That's all Willi and I had, but we were very happy. It was ours.

It was only one room. Like most apartments, the bathrooms were outside and there was no kitchen. You cooked with little gas burners. This one small room became our kitchen, bedroom and living room. Our home.

The third day after they had moved in, the woman came, insisting it was her apartment. The man who had sold them the key and rented it had been subletting. It was not his property. She demanded Kati and Willi leave immediately.

"We're not going," Willi, insisted, "There's nowhere to go."

The woman left but later returned with a man. They barged in, and before Willi could stop her, the woman started throwing Kati and Willi's belongings out onto the street.

I tried to take the things from her, but I was too late—they were already out the window. I brought the things up and she tried to throw them down again. I held onto them and wouldn't let her. When the woman and man realized they wouldn't be able to physically throw us out, she went to the police. The police came and took me to the station. I was there a long time and was worried about Kati. The curfew would be soon and all we had to eat was coffee and matzo.

The police told Willi he could go back to the apartment for now and the woman would take him to court to have him tossed out. Aunt Ibolya's husband Blondy found a lawyer. Willi went to court the next week.

I could hardly speak Hebrew at the time, and the woman spoke a perfect Hebrew. She was a Jew of Spanish decent from one of the Arab countries. A Sephardic Jew. You know, there are two kinds of Jews, Sephardic and Ashkenazi. My lawyer was an Azhkenazi Jew like me. Her lawyer, the doctor who came to testify on her behalf that I had beaten her, and the judge, were all Sephardic Jews.

The woman told the judge that her family has been here for three generations and by force this newcomer takes over her apartment. They come to this country and he takes her apartment and beats her up. Willi insisted he never touched the woman; he had only stopped her from throwing their possessions out the window. When he finished testifying, the judge announced his decision.

"Out, immediately."

I was in a shock. Not only were we thrown out, we lost our key money to the man who it turned out had only been subletting the apartment. That money was our life savings.

Willi's lawyer said he should appeal, but Blondy, disgusted, said there would be no more money for a lawyer. He took Kati and Willi to his apartment over his new tailor shop. It was a Friday night. Aunt Ibolya was not happy about this.

"Blondy, why do you think I would have Friday night dinner for four people!"

My Aunt Ibby, you could say, was a very angry person. I took Kati and we went back to my Aunt Szeren's.

I Learned to Clean from My Mother

2000

I had grown up with maids and had barely held a broom before I turned sixteen. When I was sent home from school in March of 1944, Jews were no longer allowed to employ Christian women to work in their homes and all the maids had been Christians. After the maids, cook and laundress could no longer come, I helped my mother with the household chores. I learned how to scrub—and scrub well. If I did not clean it right, I was punished. Sometimes if I was very lazy my mother would lose her temper and hit me. My mother had never gotten angry and hit me like this before. With everything going on, she was under a lot of pressure and not quite herself. My mother was very particular about her home. Just like me. Friends often ask me why I am so spotlessly clean. I simply say that I learned this from my mother.

Dallas?
1980

I realize that in telling our life story Dallas does seem to pop out of nowhere. Willi and I lived in Dallas for a few years in the early eighties. How did we end up there? Willi's idea.

In Forest Hills we had the situation where Naomi had been out of the house and then Ronnie went away at college. I went out to work everyday. There was Kati, home alone in this huge house. I said, "Kati why do we need this big house? What are you doing here all day alone? We should go to Manhattan."

I told Willi, no thank you, I'm not leaving. I'm perfectly happy here. This is all I ever wanted.

Kati resisted leaving, but I would not let up. For months she said no, but I kept trying to convince her. The house had become too empty. Yes, perhaps it did remind me of when Kati and I lived alone in the big house in Jelsava after the War.

Finally I gave Willi one condition, "I tell you what. I'll move if you find me an apartment as big as a house."

I looked at Park Avenue apartments but Kati didn't like them. The kitchens were too small, even in the penthouses. Then in Fort Lee, New Jersey, I found an apartment that satisfied her. We moved to the 21st floor of a brand-new building, The Plaza. The living room itself was a little over a thousand square feet.

I enjoyed the Fort Lee apartment. I had taken up oil painting and had a studio with plenty of light. Then not long after Ronnie left for California, Willi said he thought it was time to take it easy so he sold Dynex Plastics. We traveled—rented an apartment in Cannes, visited our house in the Bahamas. When we finally returned to Fort Lee, Willi was restless again.

I said Kati, why do we have to live in Fort Lee? Why can't we live in a more interesting place? I looked at a map and came up with a place equidistant from Naomi in New Jersey and Ronnie in California. I did some theoretical research and made a list of pros and cons for Dallas, Texas.

Willi's Dallas List

Plus	Minus
Equidistant Naomi & Ronnie	Lilly is not there
Climate has four seasons and is never too cold	
Housing excellent	
Solid Jewish community. 20,000 Jews, many political and economic leaders	
Many fine restaurants	
Presence of universities	
Many cultural activities	
Close to Vegas	

So I agreed to visit Dallas. The Jewish community threw Willi and I a large welcoming party. The people were friendly and we liked what we saw, so I told Willi I would try Dallas. He bought me a beautiful modern house—the kind of home you only see on television. But I hated Dallas. Just hated it.

She was bored.

I could only have so much of sitting in a country club all day talking about baking cherry pies. And the brunches. They would have these Sunday brunches that would start at eleven in the morning and go "until"—that's what it said on the invitation. Well, I tried to be friendly and had a brunch. At five o'clock I still had a houseful of people. This is when I realized they were hanging around to watch a football game.

That was back in 1980, and we had a satellite dish and a very wide screen television. Not many people had those back then.

I was exhausted and wanted everyone to go, but they wouldn't take a hint. Finally I announced, "In five minutes Willi will be showing a pornographic movie in the den."

That cleared them out fast.

We left Dallas after a couple of years. We stayed longer than we wanted because we had trouble selling the house. It was the most beautiful modern house. The realtor said Dallas was not ready for red paint and mirrors. They wanted neutral, nothing too strong so we stripped everything and had it painted beige.

We came back to Manhattan, rented, and then bought this apartment in 1987. This has been home ever since. Willi has never wanted to move again.

Please, Would You Stand In Between?
June 1945

From the barn the Americans called a field hospital, Willi went directly to the house where his Uncle Joseph had boarded in Budapest. Joseph Salcer had lived with an attorney and his wife, a very nice couple. It was the wife who told Willi that his Uncle had been taken by the Labor Battalion and sent to the Russian front. She had heard Joseph had been forced to stand in freezing cold water, every day, building a bridge. He died from pneumonia.

From my own Labor Battalion experience, I knew that Jews were not given uniforms and wore their own clothes. My Uncle Joseph had always worn grey suits. I don't know why, but he was always impeccably dressed in a grey suit. I thought of Joseph in the water, in a grey suit. I had loved this man like a father. But no, I had never told him. Men never spoke of such things.

Willi went to the homes of old schoolmates, hoping to find someone he knew who had survived. He went to the house of one boy to tell his mother that he had seen her son alive in Gunskirchen only a day or so before liberation.

He must be on his way home.

He never came home.

This haunts me to this day.

When he could find no one, Willi went to the homes of younger classmates, students he had known through sports teams or his sister Lilly, who had also attended the Industrial and Technical College.

Willi could not believe it when he knocked on the door and saw who was sitting in the front parlor.

"Lilly, don't you know who I am?"

I'm certain Lilly wondered who was that scarecrow at the front door in the funny German pants. I was still wearing the lederhosen the Americans had given me.

Willi told Lilly what he knew of their father. She told him how their mother, grandmother and Uncle Eugene had been sent to the left at Auschwitz. Before his turn for selection came, their Uncle Eugene threw his cane away, tried to straighten up and look like he could work.

Lilly also told Willi that when they were waiting on the line for the selection, their mother decided they were choosing every other person to go to the left or the right. She was absolutely convinced this was the system.

My mother still believed they were being sent to work, but she didn't want to be separated from Lilly, so she asked another woman to please stand in between them. Of course, this made no difference. Until the very end, my mother believed that she was being sent to work, that everything would be okay.

Willi told his sister that together they would go back to Jelsava and see what they would find.

Willi is very close with his sister Lilly, and they became especially close with everyone else in their family gone.

You wonder where my sister Lilly is now? Look out the window across Third Avenue. You see the corner apartment with the lovely chandelier? That's my sister Lilly and her husband George's place.

The Doctor in Bratislava
Fall 1945

Kati had stopped having periods in Auschwitz. When it still hadn't returned after she and Willi had married, he took her to a doctor in Bratislava.

She told the doctor that she had been given an injection in Auschwitz and after that, no more periods. She was thinking that perhaps this was the reason it had stopped. She had no idea what had been in that injection.

The doctor said it was very common for this to happen to women in the camps. Her period will come back. Kati was young and healthy. She will have babies.

"I promise you. Don't worry."

The doctor was right; during her last days in Atlit, Kati's period returned.

The Baby is Coming
1947

Every morning since Auschwitz, Kati would wake in the early morning hours then wait until dawn, sweating and thinking crazy thoughts. On September 1, 1947, Kati woke early but something was different: the crazy thoughts were gone.

"Willi, I think it's time for the baby."

He took her to Hadassah, the maternity hospital in Tel Aviv for newcomers, where Kati would give birth for free.

Kati had a long and difficult birth.

Maybe it was long and difficult for Willi, but not for me. I was just not ready so they put me in a room where I waited.

Alone in that room, Kati had a lot of crazy thoughts, but mostly she missed her own mother. She desperately wanted her own mother.

The next day, September 2, 1947, Naomi Salcer was born.

In the hospital, Willi gave Kati his good news. He had found a position as a welder in Rishon LeZion. They would leave as soon as Kati and the baby were ready.

They were building bridges and needed welders in Rishon LeZion, a small city south Tel Aviv. I went to their engineering department. They were Hungarian Jews. I told them I had graduated from the Industrial and Technical College. They said they wanted to see proof, so I wrote and got my transcripts. I went in right after Naomi was born and they said okay, you are hired. I found a one-room apartment and we moved there a few days after Kati and Naomi were released from the hospital.

Kati woke early in Rishon LeZion, but not because of crazy thoughts.

"Willi, you go back to sleep. Everything is okay. It's the baby."

It was only after my daughter was born that I slowly started to think normally again.

Speaking of breastfeeding.

Willi, it's not important.

You don't think I should mention this?

Well, if you want.

When the local hospital found out Kati had so much breast milk, they gave her bottles so she could provide milk for the babies who needed it. There was no formula in those days. So they would pick up this milk up everyday.

They paid me for my milk. So I made a little extra money.

Kati, you're not going to say what else you did with this milk?

Willi, I didn't think it was an important part of our story. But okay, if you want.

You're not going to believe this.

I put my milk in Willi's morning coffee. We didn't have much money and this helped save a few pennies.

Can you believe this?

He never knew it at the time.

Almost fifty years married and she finally tells me. I felt like a cannibal when she told me.

Oh, why are you complaining? It's why you have such a beautiful complexion.

In Rishon LeZion Willi worked as an overhead welder on a new bridge under construction, until the entire operation suddenly shut down. After a few weeks on the job, the foreman said it was too dangerous with the Arab sniper. Too many men killed and injured. Everybody goes home.

Willi worried how he would support his wife and new baby. When he went for his last paycheck, a man who had remembered Willi from his soccer days in Budapest had an idea. In Rishon LeZion the beer and wine company owns the city soccer team. They pay people to play soccer. Why doesn't Willi look there for a job?

So that became my job, playing soccer. It was very comfortable. I did almost nothing all day except sit around and drink beer. Kati was not always smiling when I came home. After a few weeks, this job also disappeared. Too many soccer players killed and injured because of snipers.

Willi heard of a job in a machine shop in Tel Aviv. If he got the position, he told Kati they would keep their apartment in Rishon LeZion and he would take the bus to work.

Carrying Naomi, Kati walked Willi to the bus for his first day of work. When Willi returned, he was surprised to see her waiting with the baby—and even more surprised to see them waiting at the bus station at the end of every workday.

"Kati, you don't have to come and meet me."

Oh yes she did. She had to see for herself that Willi was alive. She was crazy with worry that one day he would be one carried off the bus wounded or dead.

Arabs from the villages between Rishon LeZion and Tel Aviv constantly shot at the buses carrying Jews. There were always two drivers on these buses in case one was shot. The Jews had no protection from the British so they took buses and welded eighteen millimeter steel all around. Just little holes remained here and there for the drivers. They looked impenetrable. Even so, sometimes the Arabs succeeded in stopping the buses and killing someone. Even with the small holes they shot into the buses in various ways and sometimes someone was wounded or killed. I was afraid, but Kati was scared to death that one day I wouldn't come back.

When they carried a dead man off the bus, Kati told Willi she could not live this way anymore. She could no longer worry all day that something was going to happen to him. Even though Willi thought his young wife was overreacting a little—after all, she had been through a lot worse and didn't get emotional like this—he could see she was crazy with worry and knew he had to do something. He told her they would leave the very next morning and stay with his Aunt Szeren in Tel Aviv until he found another place for them to live.

Yes, we left Rishon LeZion the next morning. I bundled Naomi with blankets and put her under our bus seat. On the ride to Tel Aviv it was Willi who was crazy with worry. Every few minutes he would ask me, " Is she breathing? Why don't you check on her to see if she is breathing?"

Can't Breathe in Manhattan
Late Winter 1960

From New York's Idewild Airport, Kati, Willi and the children went to the Henry Hudson Hotel on Manhattan's West Side, a very nice place at the time. Although they were not rich by American standards, they still had a substantial amount left from the sale of Willi's Israeli rubber factory. The plan was to stay at the Henry Hudson until they decided where they would settle in America.

It was clear and cool when Kati left the hotel with Naomi and Ronnie.

I thought I would have a nice afternoon with the children. Window shopping. Lunch.

Kati was amazed at the size of the crowd on the street. So many people moving, eyes straight ahead. Everyone together. Stopping at the red light. Moving on the green.

They had walked less than a block when Kati felt the lightness on the top her head and the tightness in her chest. She held onto Naomi and Ronnie, terrified she would lose them.

Thirteen-year-old Naomi complained. "You're squeezing my hand."

At the curb, Kati stopped for the light with the rest of the crowd, crossed when everyone crossed. Then halfway up the next block, she stopped.

Why did her legs not move when her brain told her to go? Kati hated not being in control. It was so unlike her. This was crazy. She tried talking to herself.

This is ridiculous. You are taking your children on a walk in Manhattan. You are on the same street as your hotel. You marched halfway across Europe as a young girl and now your legs go like rubber? What is stopping you now? You are in New York City. There is no war here. No unexpected bombs. There is no reason to get upset. You are safe. Look, turn around and you will see your hotel.

When Kati turned, the Henry Hudson was out of sight.

Ronnie asked, "Ema, where are we going?"

"Back to the hotel."

Naomi whined, "We just got here. Why do we have to go back?"

"Do what I say, Naomi. For once, just do what I say."

I'd never experienced anything like this. I became terrified and could not continue. I started to sweat. I could hardly catch my breath. I took the children and went back to the hotel.

Kati told Willi that she would not leave the hotel without him. This pushed him to find an apartment sooner. On a recommendation, he took a three-bedroom place in a new building in Rego Park, a middle-class Queens community adjacent to exclusive Forest Hills.

Once they settled in, the children started school, Willi looked for work, and after they left for the day, Kati would crawl back into bed and get under the covers. As soon as she'd hear someone coming home, she'd hop out of bed, throw on some lipstick, comb her hair and put on a big smile so one would ever know.

I had no idea Kati was doing this when she was home alone in the Rego Park apartment. I knew she was having some problems adjusting to America. When she tried to do things such as cook like an American and it was a failure because she had baked the steaks, she got upset and cried. But I never suspected she was spending the day in bed. Kati is an intelligent and sophisticated woman and emotionally speaking one of the strongest people I've ever known. She has endured the worst imaginable and has been brave in the most difficult situations. It doesn't surprise me she wanted to protect her family from her pain and never let me know she was in bed all day.

Not Telling Willi

2000

I didn't yet tell Willi about the Russian soldiers until after we had married. How does a young woman, a virgin, bring up a story of witnessing rape and death to the young man she wants to marry? It was indelicate. Embarrassing. A shame. No, I wasn't worried that Willi would think that I had been raped. I can't say I would have felt differently if I had actually been raped, whether or not I would have told Willi. I just don't know. But when I saw how the Russians could rape young girls who had been in the camps, I knew the Russians could do anything.

Walking to Czechoslovakia
May 1945

By the end of March of 1945, the Russians were advancing from the east, the Americans from the west, and the Germans knew the Reich was collapsing. This is when the Lichtenau labor camp was emptied, and the Jewish women and girls loaded onto a cattle car. When the train stopped, they stepped into rubble that was now Leipzig, Germany. Planes were bombing.

From the train station they were marched under the guard of SS. When shrapnel pierced Kati's leg, she yanked the metal out and forced herself to keep going. She knew if she fell behind the SS would shoot her.

A week or so later, they were led by regular German army troops. These soldiers were not as cruel as the SS. They had no whips or dogs. Near the end of April, when they were somewhere east of Leipzig, the soldiers fled while the women and girls were sleeping.

We knew something was different when we woke up on the side of that road. No one was shouting for us to get our Jew asses up off the ground and start moving. It was too quiet.

When it was clear the soldiers were gone, the girls discussed what to do. Stay? Hide?

"Let's get the hell out of Germany," someone said.

Kati left with nine other girls to walk south towards Czechoslovakia.

When they came upon a clearing and saw the mansion up on the hill, one of them had been certain, "It must be a castle."

Another was sure, "Heaven."

It looked abandoned. Maybe there were real beds. Running water. The girls decided to take a chance.

Inside, the walls were covered with Nazi posters of muscular Aryans holding pitchforks and rifles.

From what we could tell it looked as if the house had been used as some sort of training camp for Hitler Youth.

Upstairs, the bedrooms were furnished with bunk beds, each three cots high.

The girls split up among two of the rooms. Kati, not wanting anyone over her, took a top bunk. For the first time in more than a year, she fell asleep on a mattress and a pillow, and slept until the banging at the front door.

The sleepy, terrified girls didn't know what to do, "Should we answer?"

They agreed that whoever was knocking would be a lot angrier if they had to break in. The oldest from the group went down, unbolted the door and ran back upstairs.

They hid in their beds and waited.

Kati could hear the drunk Russians in the hallway. She did not move or make a sound as the knob turned and the door opened. Why they chose to go into the room next door, Kati didn't know.

All night, she lay in her bunk, not moving, not making a sound, while holding the pillow over her head to muffle the sounds of the girls screaming.

When the Russians finally left, the girls in the next room were hysterical. Probably why no one immediately noticed the blood steadily seeping through the mattress from one of the upper bunks.

I don't remember the name of the girl who was raped until she was unconscious. Unless I knew someone from before everything, I didn't know names. I had forgotten about names in the camp, who people were.

"She's dead."

"No. Look. She's still alive."

The girls argued over what to do.

'We'd better find a doctor."

"A doctor? Where?"

"I say we get out of here."

"We can't just leave her to die. We have to tell someone."

"Tell who?"

"I say we go. There's nothing anyone can do for her now."

The older tough girl Kati admired said they couldn't leave her to die like an animal. We are not animals. And someone should pay for this. We should tell someone. Show them what they did.

We carried the girl to the Russians. We reported the rapes and asked for a doctor. They wanted us to identify the officers who had done this. They brought soldiers in and when we saw the ones who had raped, we lost our courage. We lied and said it had been too dark to see their faces. We said we couldn't say for sure that it had been them. Unfortunately, the doctor couldn't help the girl who was raped. She died.

The girls left and continued walking towards Czechoslovakia. A few days later, they reached a small village teeming with survivors and German soldiers, including the SS man from the Lichtenau camp.

After the hanging, the girls continued home. To avoid the Russians, they walked by night and hid by day. Only after a month did they feel safe enough to come out of the bushes and into the light.

It was the singing that did it.

We didn't know the words, but we knew it was English. And the laughter was friendly, not drunken Russian revelry.

The American convoy stopped when they saw the girls on the side of the road. A man who looked to be a very high-ranking officer because of all the tiny ribbons on his uniform came over. Kati and the girls didn't understand a word he was saying, but knew enough to get on the truck. The Americans fed them chocolate and drove them to a hospital in Prague, singing gently all the way.

Willi's White Elephants

2000

I've had many successes in my life, but I suppose where I've been least successful is in the area of real estate. There was the house in Dallas, a mansion that turned out to be a white elephant. When we went to sell it we learned it had severe foundation problems. No one was ever going to buy this house. In the eighties I went into a real estate partnership to develop some properties on Staten Island. That did not work out very well. I ended up losing over $600,000.

Up on the Roof
Winter 1947 - Spring 1948

Kati and Willi had only been back from Rishon LeZion only a few days when Willi found a place for them to live. Kati was shocked given the severe housing shortage in Tel Aviv.

"Kati, before you get too excited, maybe you should see this place."

"Willi, I'd be happy with a tent as long as it was ours."

"How about a succoh on a roof?"

"You're kidding right?"

No, he wasn't. Willi had rented a succoh, one of those one-room outdoor structures where Jewish families eat during the autumn harvest holiday.

This succoh was on the roof of a six-story building. The walls were brick halfway up and the rest glass. There was a large wooden dining table for eating and a big sink for washing outside on the roof and an indoor bathroom one floor down. A three-foot high wall enclosed the rooftop.

The succoh was only a cot long and a crib wide but I was so happy to have a place for Willi and me to call home.

They soon discovered why Willi was able to rent the succoh so easily. The landlord forgot to mention that one had to always crouch on the rooftop or the sniper would see them and take a shot. Kati learned this sniper wasn't kidding when she stood one day at the wooden table preparing soup. When she reached down for a potato, the bullet whizzed past her.

If I had not moved to get a potato, the Arab would have shot me dead. I ran into the succoh to check on Naomi. There was broken glass in her crib. The bullet had shattered the glass wall of the succoh but Naomi was fine. She had slept through everything.

After the UN voted to partition Palestine in November 1947, the ferocity of attacks against Jews increased almost immediately. The Arabs were shooting Jews and Jewish groups were retaliating. It was a very dangerous situation. Snipers became an everyday fact of life, and Kati and I seemed to have our own personal sniper.

You couldn't stand up straight because there was a danger the sniper might see you and shoot you, so Willi and I had to always walk around

bent over. In terms of lousy apartments, I'd have to put this succoh at the top of my list.

Shortly after moving into the succoh, a Mr. Weiss offered Willi a job. Mr. Weiss had a fairly good size company employing fifty people. There was a department of motor repairs, a machine shop and a department of welding and construction. The company was located in a large building on Rechov Petach Tikvah, the main street leading into Tel Aviv.

At this company I rebuilt station wagons into garbage trucks and welded steel onto buses. I had been on this job only a few weeks when Mr. Weiss called me into his office.

There was another man with Mr. Weiss. He shook Willi's hand but did not say his name; it was better that way. The man said Willi had been recommended as someone who could handle technically demanding work.

This man said the British will be pulling out and there will be Israel here, and when this happens, the Arabs will attack. We have no weapons. The British will not allow Jews to build weapons so we have to do it in secret. He said he had information that I could be helpful. There would be a meeting that night and they wanted me there.

At the meeting Willi learned there were seven hundred and twenty like him, men who were recruited for the Chativat Avodah Cvait, or Division of Army Works of the unofficial Israeli army, the Haganah.

Willi would continue working at Mr. Weiss' company for the same salary, but instead of welding steel onto buses, he would be brought the motor, chassis and seats of trucks. His job was to rebuild this material into small tanks using eighteen-millimeter steel.

Whenever I finished a tank, they came at night and took it to a kibbutz. I worked in the yard behind Mr. Weiss' company, shielded by buses. Other people in other shops worked on the guns. I was the only one at my shop who did this kind of work. Sure, everyone there knew what I was doing, but there was no danger of anyone betraying. We were like one. I worked all day building these tanks, but I never

tired. I built these tanks with a ferocious determination that never again would Jews find themselves defenseless.

Into the spring, Willi welded these small tanks while Kati took care of Naomi, worked in the ice cream shop during the evenings—and tried a little modeling in the morning. Willi wasn't too happy about this.

Why you look at me that way? I kept my clothes on.

I remember that modeling. The man never paid you.

Well, I did run out on him the last time I sat for him. When the air raid siren went off, I immediately ran home to Naomi. The longest ten minutes of my life.

To make it home quicker, Kati took the shortcut through Tachanah Merkazit, the central bus station a block from her apartment building. She was in the middle of the station when the bomb exploded. It was such a strong impact she fell to the floor.

There was fire. Everything was burning. I was lying on the floor. Some man came over and picked me up, just like a sack. He ran with me then dropped me off. I never saw his face. I ran home. Naomi was lying in the crib smiling and playing with an empty pack of cigarettes, her only toy.

Kati and I didn't realize when we moved into this building that there was an extra danger living so close to the central bus station. The Arabs didn't go for destroying buildings as much as people. They wanted to kill as many as possible. The bus station was a constant target.

When Willi came home, they packed up their belongings, put Naomi in her carriage, and walked to Blondy and Aunt Ibolya's. They were told they could stay a few days in the room behind the tailor shop. They were back living in the succoh on the apartment rooftop on May 15, 1948 when the British left Palestine and Israel declared its independence. It was a joyous day, but the singing and dancing was cut short when the Egyptian Air Force started bombing.

They recruited people to fight, but told me to keep at my job making tanks. We had very little weaponry. Our basic force was from World War II, the British Jewish Army, and some forces organized by Menahem Begin. But we beat back 30,000 Arabs within days. They had all sorts of weaponry and manpower but we beat back the armies

of five Arab nations with brains and determination. I was proud that the tanks I helped make were successful. They were heavy, but very fast and flexible. The tanks could fit up to five men and they would equip them with sirens that they would take into Arab neighborhoods at night. They would blast the siren and Arabs would come out running, holding hands, in shock.

With all the bombing, Willi decided they had to get off the rooftop. He had opportunities to acquire better housing but he passed on homes abandoned by Palestinian Arabs. Instead, he settled on Shunat Hatikvah.

Shunat Hatikvah was a slum on the outskirts of Tel Aviv predominately inhabited by Yemenite Jews. A dirty swamp really, with holes in the ground for toilets and streets of mud. Shunat Hatikvah means, "Village of the Future" in Hebrew. All I knew was that this place was not going to be Willi's and my future.

Because I was in the army I had many chances to move in where Arabs had fled, but I wanted no part of this—if you had a connection, you were in. There were some Jews who went in and took over. Their excuse was the severe housing shortage and they said these homes were the spoils of war. It's also true there were some army members who took what they wanted. Stole. Looted. The Israeli government was furious, but it was difficult to control this sort of behavior.

Shunat Hatikvah was a stinking slum, but at least we weren't in mortal danger from the bombing. I understood why Willi could not take a place where the Arabs had fled. He was never one to take what was not rightfully his. Me either. There was no difference between this sort of behavior and people who had taken over our homes after the Jews were taken.

Even though I didn't want Arab possessions, I absolutely supported the War of Independence. We had to fight the Arabs. There was no other way. It was a matter of survival. They wanted to throw us into the sea. We had to fight them. No question. My opinion has changed over the years. Now I think it's time for peace or this conflict will go on for many generations. I had supported the Oslo agreements. Unfortunately, that time has passed. I hope there will emerge someone on the Arab side to negotiate with—now there is no one to talk to. In terms of the Palestinian Arabs who fled, I think it's a practical impossibility for them to return. What do they now number? Five million people? No, I don't think they can return but I do think they should be compensated.

You're in the Air Force Now
Summer 1948

How did I end up in the Israeli Air Force? Soon after Israel and its army became official, they tested everyone who had been in its unofficial army or the Haganah. They wanted to make sure they put the right man in the right job. Every individual was important, so they wanted maximum efficiency, the right man in the right job. So we had a week of psychological and aptitude testing. For some reason I remember many of the details of this testing.

First, a British psychologist administered a personality test, asking Willi, "When you go to the pissoir and you do it, do you finish everything before you turn around and walk away or do you turn around and start to walk halfway open?"

I wanted to say, "What kind of question is this?" but I realized they would think I was not a cooperative person. So I sat there and seriously thought about it and told them that I turned around and started to walk, that I didn't wait until the last button.

Then the psychologist tied up Willi's left arm to a chair and gave him mathematical problems to solve. "You will solve these problems in five minutes or you will get an electrical shock in your left arm."

Certainly, I did not want to get an electrical shock. I saw someone else get a shock and it looked rather uncomfortable. But it wasn't as if they were threatening me with death so the idea of the shock didn't make me nervous. I finished all the mathematical problems correctly in less than five minutes.

For the next test, Willi was handed a geometrical problem to solve. They said, "Go ahead," and without warning, men starting shouting and firing guns behind them.

I'll never forget the tremendous noises disturbing my concentration. I guess they made this noise on purpose to see how I performed under duress. While all this noise was going on, I was given a complicated drawing of machinery and told there are two errors in this entire design, two flaws that would prevent the machinery from working. Find them. That was my job. I found three errors. They didn't know about the third. They thanked me.

After his testing, Willi was assigned to the new Israeli Air Force.

I was amazed at what I saw when I was sent to Tel Nof, the Israeli Air Force base. There were planes and pilots from all over the world. Then a lot of weaponry came in from Czechoslovakia with the Czech Brigade. Three thousand Jews, all perfectly trained and organized. But Ben-Gurion split up this brigade. He was afraid they might take over. They were too powerful. This was the time when Ben-Gurion feared civil war from other Jewish factions.

Whenever Willi could, he would hop a ride on a transport for the thirty- minute trip from Tel Nof to Tel Aviv so he could see Kati and his baby. When he was home, he would pick up extra money by welding in his old machine shop.

I was always tired during this period of my life. One night when I was on guard duty I fell asleep in a road. Luckily, the rumbling of a truck woke me up before it ran over me.

Holocaust Remembrance Day?
2000

You say Israel has had a Holocaust Remembrance day since 1951? I have never heard of this—you ever hear of this, Willi? All I know is that the last thing we did in Israel was remember the Holocaust. We never talked about it—we tried to never even think about it. The only time people started to talk about it openly was after the arrest of Adolf Eichmann. That was a very big deal. This happened right around the time we left Israel. The Holocaust was suddenly everywhere—and then no one really talked about it again until the Spielberg movie. These past years many people have been asking survivors what had happened. I suspect that once they hear, no one will talk about it again for a while. Perhaps this is a normal reaction; it's very hard to live with the Holocaust on a daily basis. Everyday I look out the window and see horror in beauty and evil in kindness. I wish I could be like other people and when I don't want to think about it simply shut the book on it.

One Potato, Two Potato
Summer 1949

Finally, Kati had saved up enough money to have her hair done. She had gone without a potato here and there for almost a year, secretly saving money, telling herself that a little hunger pang now and then was a small price to pay to have beautiful hair again.

I had no idea Kati was starving herself to save money to go to a beauty parlor. If I had known, I would have stopped her. She has this incredible willpower; she can go without a real meal for days. She learned how to do this when she was in the camps. I was furious when she finally told me that she had done this not only to save money for the beauty parlor, but whenever we were short of money. Starved herself to save a few pennies. She finally told me maybe twenty years after the fact. If only I had known.

Kati stepped inside the beauty parlor she'd been eyeing for months on her way to work at the Tel Aviv coffee shop. Still not fluent in Hebrew, she asked the receptionist how much to have her hair done.

I could speak Czech, German and Hungarian, but for some reason Hebrew was difficult for me to learn, especially reading Hebrew. Willi had taken an intensive course and picked up Hebrew fairly easily. He read the papers and was with adults all day that spoke Hebrew while I was home alone with Naomi.

The Tel Aviv hairdresser roughly brushed Kati's hair.

"You will need a wash before we cut.

"Okay."

"You will also need a special conditioner."

"Yes, okay."

"Have you ever had a scalp treatment?"

"Scalp treatment?" Kati repeated, not knowing exactly what the woman meant.

"You want pretty hair?"

"Yes."

"You need a setting."

So it went with Kati saying yes until she had spent all the money she had saved, plus the month's food money.

I was very upset. I ended up spending double the money that I had planned. I was angry with myself because I couldn't say no when it came to the idea of my hair looking pretty again. All this, and I didn't even like how they fixed my hair. I felt so stupid and I didn't have the courage to tell Willi I had spent so much money on my hair. After this experience, I became more assertive with what I wanted or whether I liked what they were doing, but it was such a déjà vu for me when I had my hair cut by Vidal Sassoon. This was in the sixties when he came to New York. It was a very big deal. I had to make the appointment two months in advance. I was no kid, but when I walked in, I felt like that scared young girl in the Tel Aviv beauty parlor. But then I got my courage up and told Mr. Sassoon what I wanted. Okay, maybe he didn't do what I wanted, but before I left I had the courage to say, "On somebody else's head maybe I might like it."

I Love You Willi, But...
1999

If you look in our bedroom, you might notice that Willi and I have two separate mattresses that are put together. For as long as we've been married, Willi has kicked and sometimes punched in his sleep. He can get quite violent.

Kati says I play soccer in my sleep. I never remember doing this. I never remember my dreams.

I was getting kicked so much that finally I said no more one mattress. I cannot sleep being kicked all night. But I was afraid I would hurt Willi's feelings. I finally told him when the sofa bed was ruined.

Can you believe this? I am kicking her all night and she was afraid that she would hurt my feelings.

I was young. What did I know?

She didn't tell me she didn't want to share a mattress anymore until after our new sofa bed was destroyed in the flood.

Everything is Ruined
Late Summer 1949

In the late summer of 1949, while serving in the Air Force, Willi started to do some design work on the side for five pounds a drawing. This extra money enabled him to purchase some necessities, a decent crib for Naomi, and a real table with four chairs so he and Kati could have company.

Even though we had nothing, I loved to have company. I would make a pot of beans and we would have friends over when Willi was home from the Air Force. One of our friends took a picture of Willi and Naomi and me. See how handsome Willi looks in his uniform? See how happy I look? That's not simply a smile for the photograph. I was happy.

PHOTO

Of everything Willi had bought, Kati's most prized possession was the new sleeping sofa. She first saw the sofa in a Tel Aviv shop. It was something she had never seen before, a modern design with woven fabric that on one end had a piece of blonde wood that served as an end table.

Kati thought it was a dream when Willi's foot kicked her awake and she saw the room filling with water around her new sofa bed. She turned on the light. The water in the room was more than a foot high and quickly rising.

Naomi jumped up from her crib and in the happiest toddler voice cried, "Galey Gil! Galey Gil!"

Galey Gil was the public swimming pool where I would take Naomi. She loved it there. When she saw the water, she kept saying, "Galey Gil!". The flood delighted her.

They threw on some clothes. Willi took Naomi and put her on his shoulders and Kati grabbed the box of photographs.

The water subsided about two weeks later. Willi and Kati returned to find everything covered in a thick mud and ruined. They both knew what this meant but neither said it to the other; they would have to start over again.

Things You Have Seen Many Times Before
1972

You see that picture frame behind you that looks like silver? I'm certain you have seen this type of frame before. At Dynex Plastics I made many things that you have seen many times before. What looks like chrome inside of cars or the plastic cards used in stores to hold pierced earrings. Those are also mine. All in all, I have sixteen patents, many things that you have seen before.

Business was going very well at Dynex Plastics in 1972. Willi had a good staff, Kati assured her husband. They could take care of things if he attended the Olympics. Kati herself was never going back to Germany, but she saw no reason why Willi shouldn't get to see the games. Why not? He works hard and she knew how much he loved sports.

After the storm collapsed the roof and flooded the entire factory, Kati talked to the lawyers and decided since there was nothing Willi could do, she wouldn't tell him until he came home. Why worry him? Let him enjoy the Olympics. The flood destroying his factory was not like he was losing everything again. Things were different in America; they had insurance.

Since Willi phoned the factory from Germany for a daily report, Kati asked his secretary to take his call and say everything was okay. So every day this woman went into an office without a roof to answer Willi's call. Kati's plan was to tell Willi about the flood when she picked him up at the airport.

Despite Kati's best intentions, Willi did not get a respite at the Munich Olympics before she told him about his factory. Not long after the flood, eleven Israeli athletes were assassinated by five Arabs terrorists who had entered the Olympic Village wearing tracksuits.

I was surprised but not shocked that such a thing could happen. I had seen this sort of thing many times before.

Willi Goes to Bloomingdale's
1961

After more than six months in America, Willi finally had a job. Through a Jewish professional organization, he had been recommended to Ace Plastic in Queens. The Ace Plastic Company, run by two brothers in their seventies, manufactured buttons and beads—the largest in their field. Willi was put in charge of the extrusion department at $150 a week.

They got me cheap, he told Kati, but he was thankful for the chance.

Soon after Willi started, he saw that they used two machines when they wanted to mix two different colors, one machine for each shade. Willi decided it could be done more easily and less costly with one. Without saying a word, he started the design of one machine that would double their capacity and cut their production costs in half. It's how he would spend his evenings for the next five months.

In the meantime, to get a better return, he invested the money left from the sale of the rubber factory in bonds, mostly on margin.

I remember the name Spiegel. One big investment was the Spiegel catalogue. I invested on margin. I was a very naïve investor at the time; I did not consider it a high-risk investment because Spiegel was a big name company. Growing up in Czechoslovakia, everyone knew the Spiegel catalogue. How could I go wrong with something so American?

When the stock market dropped, Willi received a margin call.

"Kati, I had invested in bonds on margin, bought everything at eighty percent margin."

"Willi, I don't understand. What does this mean?"

"It means we've lost all the money from the sale of the rubber factory."

"Everything?"

"We are penniless."

The next week Willi took his design for the machine to the two brothers at Ace Plastic. He hoped that they would accept his design, offer him some shares in the company and he would progress.

For his efforts, they gave Willi a ten-dollar raise.

When Willi told Kati that this was not the place for him, she agreed. His plan was to tell the brothers that he would stay until a new person was trained.

When I told them I would be leaving they just listened without saying a word. Finally one of them asked if this was my final decision. When I said yes, they told me to leave, immediately. I was in a shock. I really believed I would stay with this company a few more months until a new person was trained.

"Willi, what are you doing home so early?"

"Kati, I lost my job."

He slumped into an armchair then pulled himself up.

"Willi, where are you going?"

"Bloomingdales."

"Bloomingdales?"

Willi wandered the aisles of Bloomingdales that day. He looked at merchandise and watched people shop. He decided he would think of a new product, something Americans would buy if it existed.

He had it in his mind that he would invent such a thing.

Don't ask me why, but whenever I've been confronted with failure, it has done something to me. I don't get depressed for very long. Instead, I'd get this surge of energy where all I think about is what I have to do.

Willi was walking down a street in Manhattan, worrying how he could possibly find investors to develop one of his ideas into a product. Who in America would be willing to bank on some guy running around town with a Czech accent? This is when Willi looked across the street, and there of all people was Dershowitz, a textile manufacturer he had known in Israel.

"Dershowitz, what are you doing here?"

"Salcer, what are you doing here?"

He told Willi that he had come to America a little over year before. Willi said he'd been here a little less than a year and was looking to start a factory.

"Problem is. I have no money."

Dershowitz had an idea. He had three rich cousins in America, the Berger brothers. They came over from Czechoslovakia after the War and started making money by selling scrap plastic.

"They have a lot of money and they know nothing."

"They must know something."

Don't get him wrong, Dershowitz explained. His cousins were hard workers, but very simple people, simple uneducated Jews. Maybe they'd like to invest in a factory. He knew Willi's record from Israel. He'd be a good investment. Knowing his cousins, they'd like the idea of graduating from scrap dealing to becoming manufacturers.

"Why don't you introduce me to the Berger brothers?"

Willi went to meet the Bergers. They spoke briefly and discussed his ideas. After the meeting, the brothers went to Israel to check out Willi's background. When they returned, they negotiated the terms with Willi. Everyone agreed the Bergers would invest all of the money, about $250,000, and get 70% of the business. Willi would get 30%, become CEO of the company and have 50% of the voting rights.

"Now you choose," Willi told the brothers, "which of the three products you would like to manufacture."

I had three ideas I wanted to develop. One was plastic lace tablecloths. The second, polyfoam, a material that didn't exist at the time but can be seen today in cups used to drink coffee. I thought it had a big future. The third was a plastic foam that could be used with textiles. This idea was ultimately realized in clothing, especially coats made with foam backing.

The Berger brothers said, "Plastic lace tablecloths."

They liked the tablecloths because lace tablecloths were not only something they knew and could imagine, but required the least investment.

The brothers told him, "If you can do this, Salcer, we will buy you a Cadillac."

Willi leased a building in Jersey City for their new factory, the B&S Corporation—Berger and Salcer—and for the next eight months, worked day and night designing and building the new machinery.

Nobody had ever made such machines. This product had never been made before but Willi was confident.

The Berger brothers came for the trial run. Willi pushed the button. The sprockets broke. Nothing worked.

The three Berger brothers said it will never work and left.

Willi went back to the brothers and said he needed a little more money to make it work. They said no. Working all hours, Willi rebuilt with what he had. It worked.

For the first time I understood the desperation my father must have felt after he tried to modernize the family farming business with new agricultural machinery and everything fell apart.

The plastic lace tablecloths were a huge success and made the Berger brothers even richer. They never bought Willi a Cadillac.

You Also Cried?
2000

After the War, whenever she was alone, Kati would cry. To help stop her crying, she would look at the photographs that Ilka the cleaning woman had saved, particularly the photo of her parents vacationing on the Italian Riviera. She would look at this photo and think of how her parents looked happy and how they would also want their daughter to be happy.

PHOTO

Kati's Parents on the Italian Riviera

Kati, I also cried whenever I was alone.

You also cried?

Yes, for many years.

I never knew this. I never knew you cried.

The Call
1962

The children were in school, Willi at work and Kati under the bed covers in their Rego Park apartment when she got the call from the woman in Brooklyn.

"Mrs. Salcer, I think I have something that belongs to you."

I had packed so quickly when we left Israel that I had left behind the photographs that Ilka had saved. This woman from Brooklyn had gone to Israel. A mutual friend had found the album and had been saving it for me. The woman from Brooklyn had offered to bring the photographs to New York and find me.

The woman gave Kati directions to her home in Brooklyn. Even though Kati had yet to drive in America because she didn't know the language or where she was going, she tossed every excuse out the car window as she pulled away from her Queens apartment building. What would be the worst thing that could happen, that Kati would get lost? So her English isn't perfect; she'll figure it out.

When Kati pulled away, she was once again that fearless woman who kept her foot down on the gas pedal and drove so fast around her Ramat Gan neighborhood back in Israel that the local gas station owner had asked Willi to please slow down his wife a little. How Kati had loved driving, and thanks to Willi agreeing to show her after she asked him nicely one night, "Willi maybe you can teach me to drive," she was one of the few women she knew of in Israel who drove a car.

I had never driven to Brooklyn, but I didn't care. I got lost and drove down a one-way street, but I found the woman's home.

After Kati returned home to her Rego Park apartment with the album of photographs Ilka had saved, she never spent a day under the covers again.

Kati, What Should I Do?
1951

I was a twenty-seven year old man with a family and still poor. I had to make a plan for what to would do when I left the Israeli Air Force. One possibility was hydraulic garbage trucks. They didn't have anyone in Israel who made these trucks and some people had asked me to form a cooperative. They said because of my Air Force record, I could get the capital investment necessary. And we could get the city of Tel Aviv as a customer, no problem. The other possibility was to start a rubber factory with Lali Lowy, a man I had worked with in the machine shop, and Gyuri Beck. Lali would do sales, Gyuri would be the chemist and I would build the machinery and run the factory. Gyuri was an eccentric genius. I liked him a lot but I don't think Kati was too crazy about Gyuri.

Gyuri was okay. But it was a little strange the way he went around with his own bodyguard, that guy Marshik,

Marshik had been a police captain in Budapest. Gyuri had hired because he had gotten into a lot of trouble with the British. They'd stop him and he'd be drunk and start calling the British names.

Gyuri sometimes drank too much.

I wanted to start a rubber factory with Gyuri and Lali. I thought this was the real opportunity. In Israel they imported all major rubber products—v-belts, for example, the belts that drive machinery—for a tremendous amount of money. Millions. I had done the research—I knew we could make better v-belts for a fraction of what it cost to import. Problem was, we'd have no financial backing. I wanted Kati's opinion. I needed her support. I couldn't do the rubber unless she was behind me one hundred percent. Do you remember this discussion, Kati?

Actually, I have no memory of this conversation at all.

One of the most important decisions of my life and you don't remember?

Trucks or rubber, I didn't know the difference. You probably told me and I had no idea what you were talking about or which one was better. So what I probably told you was do the one you wanted because otherwise I knew you'd be miserable.

When Willi was ready to launch the rubber factory, he requested an official discharge from the Israeli Air Force, explaining to the officer that he had been in the military for over three years.

"Almost four years if you count my service in the unofficial army."

"I'm sorry, but no discharge."

"What are you talking about? I know men who served much less time who have been let out."

"We cannot let you go because you are needed."

"This is not right. I have done my part in every respect."

I learned that the military refused to discharge all 720 members of the original Chativat Avodah Cvait or Division of Army Works. We 720 became part of this division before Israel even existed. They said they needed us, so they wouldn't let any of us out of the military. As you will see, many times the Israeli government was unreasonable. When they needed manpower or money, they often took whatever was possible. Those of us in the Division of Army Works refused to let the government take advantage of us.

There were meetings, and many of the 720 members of the Division of Army Works went to attorneys, including Willi.

We felt the government was wrong and decided to fight in court. We did not consider ourselves unpatriotic for doing this. We remembered what it was like in Europe when there was no one to turn to for justice. So did I think it unpatriotic to fight the Israeli government on this decision? Quite the contrary. When a government has wronged you, it is your patriotic duty to fight. When we sued, the Israeli government, they knew their decision would not stand up in court, so they let us out just before the court date.

The rubber factory was as successful as Willi had predicted. They couldn't make the v-belts fast enough. Not only the government, and stores all over Israel, but the army and navy were customers. By 1952, when Mayor Surkes came to see Willi, the factory had added fan belts and bicycle tubes to its product line.

Mayor Surkes was from Kwa Saba, a city of 30,000 about ten miles north of Tel Aviv, and two miles from the Arab border. Mayor Surkes also brought with him Mr. Bernstein, a banker. The Mayor said they had no employment in Kwa Saba and the

rubber factory could become a major employer. He proposed that they would build a modern facility if the rubber factory would come to his city.

"We'll give you anything you need, even the financing. Here is the banker."

Mayor Surkes said I could work with top architects and design any type of building I wanted. At the same time, I got a call from the government. They said Israel was getting reparations from Germany, and as part of the reparation agreements, certain industries could buy machinery from Germany. The Israeli government would let us buy this machinery through low-cost loans. This meant we could have new machinery. It was an incredible opportunity. Everything in the factory was made of old discarded steel.

Willi was working with an architectural firm on the building design and researching machinery to buy in Germany when Gyuri Beck told him that he wanted out of the factory. Gyuri said he had a problem with Lali Lowy. Since Lali handled sales, this put Willi in charge of every other aspect the operation. He was 28 years old.

Before Willi left for Germany as part of an official Israeli delegation, he was also made head of Israel's Manufacturers Association.

For days we discussed what Willi should wear to run his first manufacturer's meeting. We decided a suit would make him look older.

Kati thought I would look more responsible in a suit. Most of the men in the association were in their sixties.

Kati saw Willi off at the airport for his trip to Germany. She could not have been prouder as she watched him head up the stairs to the plane in his suit.

When Willi reached the top of the stairs, he turned and called out to her, "Take care of yourself! You're pregnant. Be careful what you do."

"I won't do anything you wouldn't do!"

With this, he made his way past the other passengers and down the staircase.

He told Kati, "Don't you dare."

She was afraid that I would look at other girls in Germany.

Did I worry about other women with Willi going to be away for so many weeks? Sure, I did. I was young, but I was not a fool.

In the German factories where Willi went to order machinery, everyone was businesslike and polite. No one was overly friendly, but there was no anti-Semitism.

Israel had an office of reparation in Germany that had set everything, where to go, which factories. They kept us on a pretty busy schedule so in the evenings we'd often go out for relaxation.

Willi was seated at the Hamburg nightclub table with Lali and two steel manufacturers from Jerusalem. The club's comedian had everyone howling. He would ask people, "Where are you from?" and then poke fun.

The comedian asked Willi's table, "Where are you from?"

"Israel," one of the steel manufacturers answered.

The comedian said he did not hear and asked again, "Where are you from?"

The steel manufacturer stood up and shouted. "Israel! I am from Israel!"

The packed nightclub went completely silent. Not even the sound of ice in a glass. Nothing. We stood up and slowly walked out. No one said a word. Not one person moved.

Let Them Pay Now
1998

When the payments from the Germans started in the early 1950's, Kati would have nothing to do with it. Although Willi took loans for his business to buy German machinery, she and Willi were among the few they knew in Israel who didn't accept any kind of reparation money from Germany for their personal suffering. Willi tried to convince Kati otherwise, but she was emphatic.

"Willi, there's no way I can take blood money."

"We don't have any money. We need it badly. Everyone else is taking the money. There's no shame in it."

"How much for my mother and father? My brother? My grandparents?"

More than forty years later when they were discussing the scandal of the Swiss banks and Jewish savings, Willi suggested, "Now that we don't need the money, why not let the Germans pay? Take the six hundred a month or whatever they're giving survivors and spend it on you. Have fun with this money. Do whatever you want with it."

This sounded good to Kati. She applied for reparation. Now every time she spends this money, she has a certain satisfaction.

"You know the expression to thumb one's nose?"

On the Israeli Radio
1951

On the radio Kati had a favorite program. People would come on and say they were looking for so and so. Sometimes it actually happened that people who had thought others had perished in the War were actually alive and living in Israel. So Kati would listen to the radio program for her brother Alexander. This wasn't so farfetched, Kati would tell herself. After all, had she not been window shopping in Tel Aviv when she saw the reflection.

"Is that you Aggie?"

It was Agnes, Katie's old schoolmate from Forstner, and it turned out Agnes had been in Israel almost as long as Kati. So why could it not happen that one day someone would get on the radio and say my name is Alexander Kellner and I am looking for my sister Katarina Kellner?

This was what Kati told herself as she listened to her favorite radio program and dreamed of finding her brother.

How Can God not Listen to a Little Boy?
April 1944

When Kati's younger brother Alexander was told the family would have to leave their home taking only what they could carry, his one big worry was his German shepherd and his red cat. What would happen to his animals? No pets were allowed in the ghetto.

Alexander told Kati that a cat would never go after its family but a dog would go after its owner. The cat would be okay, but the dog would follow him into the ghetto and that would be the end.

Someone had told Alexander that the Rabbi in Plesivec had excellent connections with God and could do all kinds of miracles. So Alexander took his dog to the Rabbi, a poor man who lived with his family in one room behind the temple.

Although they were not religious Jews, the Kellner family were good and proud Jews who went to temple on holidays. Alexander had studied for his Bar Mitzvah—was it his fault that Hitler came and it never took place?

In the one room behind the temple the Rabbi already had animals other people had left with him. Dogs. Cats. A tiny calf. The Rabbi took Alexander's dog, but returned the animal later that same day.

"Rabbi, why do you bring my dog back?"

The Rabbi said he had been threatened.

"Rabbi what should I do? What will happen?"

"Pray, Alexander. Pray, and everything will be okay."

"Are you sure everything will be okay if I pray?"

The Rabbi said yes, Alexander, I am sure.

Still Looking
1945, and 23 Years Later

After a few weeks in the hospital for survivors in Prague, the doctors did not want to release Kati, but she was set on going. The seventeen year old left with some clothes and a small allowance on a train heading to Budapest. She had heard that in Budapest there were still Jews. She went to the home of her grandmother's brother and his wife, hoping they were alive. They were.

They tried to convince Kati that everyone else was gone—her father, mother, brother, grandmother and grandfather. Now it was time for Kati to get better, to please stay with them and recover.

Who could say for certain my family was gone? I had to see for myself.

Granted, Kati had been there when the most frightening human being she'd ever seen sent her mother, brother and grandmother to the left.

She had looked him directly in his dead eyes.

"Right," he had told Kati.

To the left, her mother, brother and grandmother.

Kati turned and watched how they walked, together holding hands.

"Don't look," someone had ordered.

It was years before Kati would know the name of the man with the dead eyes, Josef Mengele, the camp doctor in charge of selection for the gas at Auschwitz.

No matter how her great-uncle and aunt tried to convince her that her family was all gone, Kati couldn't stop believing that perhaps some had survived. Maybe her brother had been pulled from the line for the gas and put to work. This happened. Even though Alexander was only thirteen, maybe he suddenly looked useful. Maybe they needed a skinny kid who could climb in and clean hard-to-reach places, someone who could shimmy down into a latrine. Or maybe some guard had taken an instant fancy and

decided to make him a favorite pet. This also happened. There was no logic, no reason in Auschwitz. Anything could happen.

Hadn't Alexander told Kati not to worry? Didn't he say that after everything he would be the perfect younger brother? On the train he had promised that they would go back home and he would let Kati take his bed if she wanted. No more fighting, and he would give his sister all his chocolates.

Then there was Kati's father.

All Kati knew was that the SS had taken him away. Maybe he'd been sent to Mauthausen or Bergen Belsen. He could be on his way home now. And, why not? After all, it had taken Kati a month of walking before the Americans had picked her up. And what about her grandfather? They said he had been put in a prison in Bratislava and was probably sent to Auschwitz. But wasn't this the man who had returned from the First World War after seven years in Siberia? Kati used to sit on his lap while he told her how he'd been taken prisoner. How his wife Ida, Kati's grandmother, was certain he was dead. Imagine Ida's surprise when the handsome soldier walking down the street turned out to be her very own beloved Joseph.

Against their advice, Kati left her uncle and aunt in Budapest to take the train home to her village of Plesivec.

I had to see for myself.

On her way to the station Kati ran into Gabi Strauss, an old friend who was also taking a train home. Gabi was a son of a lawyer from Roznava, a small city twenty miles from Kati's Plesivec. Roznava had been Kati's father's childhood home. Gabi and Kati's fathers had been friends growing up.

It was Gabi who knew what had happened to Kati's father.

Ladislav Kellner had been put into a camp in Hungary just for doctors and pharmacists, altogether about three hundred men. Gabi knew this because at the time he was in a camp not far away, a camp for Jews and political prisoners.

At first the SS had the men at Kati's father's camp working, but then after a couple of months they had them dig their own grave. When it was big enough, they shot them all within five minutes. For a half an hour they ran a machine gun over and over, to make sure.

Gabi said he had heard this was going to happen. The night before, he and a friend had sneaked out of their camp and went over by Kati's father. They begged him and some other men to come with them; they were sure to be killed if they stayed.

"Your father said no. He told me he knew that his family had been taken to Auschwitz. He looked up at the sky and said he wanted to go to the same place."

Ladislav Kellner was 45 years old.

Even though Gabi had said her father was dead, Kati told herself that he hadn't actually seen her father shot, so it was still rumor. She said goodbye to Gabi and took a train for home.

Three hours later Kati was in Plesivec. As she walked down the main street, she could see lights in her house. Her father must be home, waiting for her. He must have managed to crawl out of the pit at the last minute. Or maybe it was Alexander. Maybe they had put her brother to work.

Kati hurried down the street, convinced her family needed her.

When she got closer, she could see someone else eating in her kitchen.

I stood there, staring at the strangers living in my house, until Ilka, my father's cleaning woman, came up from behind and put her arms around me.

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23 Years Later

That summer of 1968, when Kati, Willi and the children went to Budapest and Kati had the chance she see her father's grave and finally accept that yes, her father was dead. It was not the same for her brother.

Whenever Willi went into their Budapest hotel room, it seemed the telephone book was open to the "K's", he immediately knew what Kati had been doing.

"Kati, I don't think calling is such a good idea."

It broke his heart thinking of her dialing and asking, "Excuse me, but I am looking for Alexander Kellner."

Every time, the same answer.

I had kept in the back of my mind a fantasy that my brother Alexander had somehow survived and had been living all these years in Budapest, and was waiting for his older sister to call. So when we went to Budapest in 1968, I went through the telephone book and called every Kellner. I did this every time I was alone in the hotel room.

PHOTO

This is a photo of my brother Alexander that Ilka had saved. He was a very sweet boy with a gentle and sensitive disposition.

...From the Garden on the Top
1953

The new rubber factory opened for business a few months after my visit to Germany. Here is a photograph of the architect's model. At my request, they designed a building without interior columns. I wanted this so that there would be more room for machinery, and so that from my second floor glass-enclosed office, I would be able to see every piece of machinery.

PHOTO

This is a photo of Willi outside United Rubber Works. He's the handsome and tall one, in the center. The man next to Willi on the left is Pinchas Safir, Israel's Minister of Industry and Commerce. Lali Lowy is the man on the right, looking over Willi's shoulder.

PHOTO

When the new factory opened, Willi told Kati it was time for them to leave Shunat Hatikvah.

Even though Willi had this factory, he had put most of the money he made back into the business so we still could not afford to move out of the slum. I used to joke that I was going to leave Willi for one of his workers because they made more money than him.

Willi purchased a two-bedroom apartment on Jabotinsky Street in Ramat Gan, a very nice neighborhood a few miles from Tel Aviv. Even though Kati was still not fluent in Hebrew, she knew what Ramat Gan translated into: The Garden on Top.

To make life easier, Willi bought the family a car, hired the pregnant Kati a maid and bought Naomi more dolls than she knew what to do with.

...To the Top of the World
1956

It's an interesting story how we ended up buying the house in Ramat Gan. Kati was always one to watch her pennies and did not easily spend on herself. I was making good money and wanted her to enjoy herself. In addition to Naomi, she worked hard taking care of Ronnie, who was a sickly child even after the surgery to repair his hernia when he was a baby. Ronnie was born in January of 1954, and in the fall of 1956, he still required constant attention. There was always something with Ronnie. He had terrible asthma that kept us awake at night. Kati worked hard, so I convinced her to go buy herself a new dress.

Actually, it didn't take too much convincing.

Kati knew just the place to go—the Gaby Salon in Ramat Gan, the most exclusive dressmaker in the area. But when Kati came home, it wasn't the couture she talked about, but the house where the dressmaker lived and had their business. It was the most beautiful house she had ever seen, up on a hill with a gorgeous garden. There was even a cottage in the back.

Later that evening when Kati and Willi met friends for dinner, all Kati could talk about was this house.

Kati visited this house during the height of the Sinai crisis of 1956, a time of world anger against Israel for invading Egypt, and there was fear among Israelis that the Russians would make good on their threats and bomb. Many Jews sold their homes cheap and left the country.

At dinner, their friends told Kati and Willi that the owners of the Gaby Salon were desperate to leave. Although many were leaving, it was not something people talked about openly.

To come to Israel was called "Aliyah" or rising up. To leave Israel was called "Yorad" or going down. I made no judgments against the people who wanted to leave, especially European-born Jews who remembered what the Russians could do. They could do anything. At the time, I even suggested to Kati that she take the children and go to Switzerland until the Sinai situation blew over. It was a tense time.

Many thought the Russians might come in and use an atomic bomb on Israel.

I told Willi no way. You stay. We stay.

Without telling Kati, Willi made an offer on the house. They said yes.

Many times friends have asked why I never complain that Willi has always worked so hard, why I didn't mind bringing him supper if he came home near midnight. I have always said that I am a very lucky woman to have a husband like Willi. How many women have a husband who will buy his wife her dream?

In the late fall of 1956, Kati, Willi and the children moved from the apartment on Jabotinsky to the finest house in Ramat Gan, twenty-four stone steps up from Bialik Street, the top of the world.

It was a party just like many parties that Kati and Willi hosted for their friends. Kati loved to entertain, just like her mother. There was a rule when Kati threw a party: no talking politics. Perhaps this is what made her such a popular hostess.

There were about fifteen political parties at the time and twice as many opinions. After a few minutes, most gatherings disintegrated into heated political discussions that often became very personal. Kati would not allow this at our parties.

Kati was involved with guests when Willi decided to check on the children. Immediately, he could see something was wrong with Ronnie. They called Dr. Heller, who came over immediately. He tapped Ronnie's knees with the small hammer.

"Ronnie has no reflexes. I want you to take him to the hospital."

At Assutah Hospital, they took fluid from boy's spine and made the diagnosis.

"Polio."

They told us if he were to live, he needed water. So Kati stayed at his bedside for days feeding him teaspoons of water. She did this because she did not trust that the nurses would give him enough water. She never left Ronnie's side. It was a very difficult time.

All I remember thinking was my boy had to have water or he would die. I refused to let him die. I slept on and off sitting in the chair beside him. But I was on alert and the slightest movement from him woke me up.

When Ronnie was in the hospital his dog went a little crazy. He was a German shepherd who was very attached to Ronnie.

Ronnie always loved animals, like my brother Alexander.

With Ronnie suddenly gone, the dog became anxious and I suppose this is why he defecated all over the house. I was upset about our son, but seeing this triggered something in me. Memories of lying in excrement in the camps perhaps. I couldn't get myself clean enough. It was a horrible feeling. This beautiful house never felt the same.

You will Find Something Else
1972

Before my son Ronnie went to Boston University, he had attended Hofstra on Long Island. Hofstra University had wanted Ronnie on their basketball team and I think he had it in his mind to be a professional ballplayer. Ronnie was a sickly kid who came to love sports in addition to being a scholar. He excelled in soccer, basketball and baseball. In high school he was All Star in various sports and in 1971 the Long Island Press chose him as the scholar/athlete of the year. Here is an article that mentions this. Imagine, this honor for a boy who once had polio.

PHOTO

Ronnie, Long Island Press

Ronnie went to Hofstra playing basketball and he injured his ankle again and again. Finally, the doctors said your basketball career dreams are over. He thought—remember he was only eighteen—he thought well, that's the end of the world if I cannot be professional player. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I tried to influence him not to take it too hard, that he would find something else in life. I felt very bad for him. No, I didn't tell him that I once had a dream to become a doctor. It didn't occur to me to tell him this. Ronnie is surprised that I kept the article? I suppose I keep many things, like papers he wrote when he was in college, many things he doesn't know about. Ronnie did find something else in life; he became a successful sports agent who represents hockey players. I'm very proud of him. He started to do this when a friend who played professional hockey asked him to look over his contract. This was at a time hockey players didn't make much money and were often taken advantage of financially.

You had asked if I had any regrets in my life. I do. My one regret is that when Ronnie was a boy I was always working so hard that I didn't get to see him play sports. I'm so sorry I missed so many of his games. I wish I had been there.

The Taxman
1957

When the men from Israel's internal revenue came into Willi's office at the United Rubber Factory, he welcomed them. Willi did not have a problem with being audited. He had a fine accounting staff, including his sister Lilly, who had been a mathematical whiz, all her life.

"Take any books you want. We are one hundred percent kosher. Please go ahead and let me know how I can be of help."

What Willi did not understand was why they barely looked at the books. Instead, they spent their time talking to his employees and checking the inventory. After a week, Willi understood.

The tax men said they found irregularities and his books had been rejected.

"Rejected? What are you talking about?"

In 1953, the factory was making bicycle tubes and bought 550,000 valves from Germany. They looked into the invoices and there were 30,000 valves missing. This was evidence Willi had been selling bicycle tubes on the black market.

"That's crazy. The valves are a penny item. First of all, I don't count all the valves when they come in—this would be impossible. I don't even check to see if it's exactly as delivered. Plus, some of the valves were no good. We just threw them away."

They said Willi was also missing two invoice books and they believed he used these missing invoices to bill out and not declare income.

"Two missing invoice books out of hundreds and you make this assumption?"

They also wondered how such a young man who had come to Israel with nothing could end up with the finest house in Ramat Gan.

After the taxmen left, Willi went to an attorney.

"So you're telling me this is a usual practice by the government, saying people are tax cheats?"

It was known. The country desperately needs money and they take what they can get from businesses. The attorney has another client—a man who makes TV sets and radios. They told him those little green eyes used in the dials were missing. He must be selling on the black market. Same as the bicycle valves.

"What can I do?"

To win, Willi would have to prove he was right and they were wrong. To do this, he would have to produce the missing invoice books.

"How can I produce them when they most likely stole them?"

Exactly. This is why the attorney advised Willi to settle.

"That's it? They win? They get my money and ruin my reputation?"

They'll get Willi's money, but they won't ruin his reputation. They'll keep this quiet because they want Willi to stay in business. His business is good for the country, and if Willi goes out of business, they get no more money."

"I won't stand for this."

There was nothing Willi can do.

Nothing he can do? Of course there was something Willi could do. Willi refused to ever be put in the position again in life where he would be told there was nothing he could do and be expected to accept this. Maybe he couldn't turn to the courts, but there was something Willi could do: he could leave Israel.

This tax business impacted me emotionally to a great extent. I felt that I had worked hard and given Israel years of my life. Building the tanks, serving in the Air Force, and then building a factory that not only saved the country millions in hard currency but also provided a living for hundreds of families. I felt that I had done my best for my country and now they were accusing me of being a cheat. I knew Israel needed money, especially since Sinai, but I thought this was the wrong way to get it. On my lawyer's advice, I settled with the government and paid millions in fines. After I paid, I felt that Israel, a country I had loved and given my complete loyalty, had blackmailed me. This is when I decided that I would leave, but I did not tell anyone I was planning on going, not even Kati, until brunch some months later at the Arcadia Hotel.

You know why Willi told me he wanted to leave Israel during brunch in a fancy hotel like the Arcadia? He knew I loved Israel and if he told me in such a place I'd have to stay calm.

"What? Leave Israel? Why?"

He needed a bigger challenge. Israel was too small for him. Willi felt hemmed in. Every time he introduced a new product, within six weeks the factory made enough for everyone in the country. In America, the possibilities were limitless. It would also be better there for the children. Here they have mandatory service for both men and women. In Israel there will always be war. Something

"Willi, I thought there was a ten year wait to get into America?"

There were ways around this. America had a strict quota on Jews from Israel, but they were letting Czechs in and they still had Czech citizenship.

I did not want to leave Israel—I loved Israel—but I told Willi I would go to the United States with one condition. If the children were called Jews in a nasty way or in any way felt the hatred, we would come back to Israel, immediately. Willi said we wouldn't sell the house, and promised if the children had any experience with anti-Semitism, we would come back.

Even if they didn't go to America, Willi told his wife he wanted to sell his share of the rubber factory, take some time off and retire. He didn't want to grow to be an old man without enjoying life a little.

What did Kati say?

Kati knew her husband was not telling her what was really bothering him. Yes, Israel was too small and they did not want the children in the military. These were things Willi did not like about Israel, but things he could live with—until the tax business. Since he paid all those fines for something he did not do, Kati knew Willi saw Israel differently.

She didn't say this when he asked what she thought. Instead Kati said yes, she would try America.

Over the next months, Willi replaced himself with three men then sold his share of the rubber factory to Lali Lowy. He took the proceeds from the sale and exchanged the Israeli currency for gold bars.

Yes, I knew it was illegal to do this. With Israel's terrible inflation, I felt that I had to buy the gold bars with the proceeds from the rubber factory in order to protect my family's savings. After my persecution by the government, paying a substantial fine for a tax offense I did not commit, I did not feel guilty about acting in self-interest. I make no excuse for having done this.

We buried the gold bars in the house under the stone by the fireplace. Willi and I did this one night when the children were asleep.

Willi soon learned that leaving Israel would be more complicated than he had thought.

I had to go to the police for written confirmation that I was not a criminal. I had to go to the tax department, the Israeli IRS, and get

proof that every penny was paid. I had to go to the Air Force and get the okay that I had fulfilled my obligation. I was told, "You are leaving this country? Incredible." They tried to convince me. "You cannot leave after what you have done here." But I needed all these signatures and approvals. It took many months.

When Willi started to seek approvals to leave, he and Kati tried to keep it a secret because of the stigma, but word got out anyway. This became apparent when people refused invitations to their parties, when people they thought were their friends stopped speaking to them. Some people asked them outright. "You are leaving this country? How can you leave this country?"

I found it especially upsetting, maybe even more than Willi. I could not believe the anger when people learned we were trying to leave. People I thought were my friends suddenly turned their backs on me.

I also found it very upsetting. People who came to Israel long after us, people who hardly spoke the language, didn't speak to us. You are leaving this country? I did a hundred times more than they did by the army. Building companies and giving hundreds of people work. We were looked at as traitors.

Once Willi had all the approvals, he resold the gold bars and bought American dollars.

I figured it would be easier to transport dollars as opposed to gold bars. Then I learned that I wasn't allowed to take the money out of the country. My own money. I asked Dr. Weiss, the friend of Kati's family, a lawyer with the Jewish Agency, for advice. He said, "Well, there is this man

Smuggling. It was smuggling.

So I gave the man the dollars and we agreed he would put it in my numbered account in Switzerland. I told Kati that I would go there by myself and call her. If everything were okay, she would come to Switzerland with the children. So I went to the bank in Switzerland. All I could think was what if the money wasn't there. If I didn't have a penny, how would I support a family?

He could not sue anybody. It was black market.

But there it was, there was a numbered account I was given. My entire account was there and I called Kati in Israel. I simply said, "come."

One thing I would like to mention. Even though Willi and I left Israel, we love Israel. We still have friends and have visited Israel many times over the years.

Yes, even though the government could be extremely unfair, I loved Israel. I still love Israel.

Hand in the Fan
1965

It was probably not a good idea that they told me I had six hours. I calculated that I had enough time to go back and finish writing up what needed to be done for the week at the factory. It was a Monday, and I did this every Monday. I didn't trust anyone else to do it correctly, so after they bandaged my hand, I went back to the factory.

It was crazy what Willi did with his hand. He was inspecting an industrial fan at his tablecloth factory and someone made a mistake and pressed the button. His hand was caught and mangled. Willi went straight to the hospital. They told him he would have to have surgery within six hours to save his hand.

Unfortunately, because I always left at eight, nine at night, I didn't know about rush hour traffic. Imagine, I didn't know about rush hour traffic in the New York metropolitan area. But we hit a jam and I didn't think I'd make it to the hospital in time for the surgery. Luckily they saved my hand, although I lost feeling in some fingers. My doing something like this—perhaps it does come from thinking you have to overcome and keep going. Thinking this way did help me survive at one time. When the SS shot me in the leg during a march, I looked down and saw meat hanging, but I didn't stop; I forced myself to keep going. I knew if I stopped they would kill me. Kati is right; it was crazy what I did with my hand, but that is how I reacted.

Refacing
1985

Willi can get quite miserable when everything is going okay—when he has nothing to do he gets bored.

Not long after they had moved back to New York City from Dallas, Willi was walking around the apartment asking, "What can I do?"

"Willi, why don't you let me do what I need to do and go read the paper?"

So he sat down with the Wall Street Journal.

Willi would often get ideas from reading the paper. That day he read about someone who had tried to make old cabinet doors look like new and went bankrupt. Willi told himself that he could do this the right way, but felt at sixty years he was too old to start a new factory. So Willi decided he would use other manufacturers for products he would invent. This was not on the level of having his own factory, but it was something he thought would keep him occupied. He rented an office in the Empire State Building and went to work.

Have you heard of cabinet refacing? Yes, that's when those people from Sears call asking if you'd like to have your kitchen cabinets refaced. That was my product. Now that you mention it, when one considers certain products I invented—the plastic lace tablecloths, cabinet refacing or the plastic that goes into cars and looks like real chrome—these are things which give the appearance of something else. To simply look at these products, it would be difficult to tell that they were not what they appeared to be. One would have to examine it much closer.

Quick Weekend Getaway
1997

It had been Willi's idea. He had read quite a bit about it and told Kati he would like to see it. Maybe they could make a nice weekend of it, stay at a top D.C. hotel and dine in one of the best restaurants.

It had been my idea to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. After we did the Shoah tapes, I had read about it, and I don't know why, but I wanted to see it. I talked Kati into it. She didn't want to go. I told her we could make a quick weekend getaway out of it.

They checked into their Washington hotel, freshened up, and went to the Museum. On display were the large red bowls from Auschwitz.

Ten sips of soup. Take more than ten sips and the guard will slam you on the back of your head.

"Willi, let's go. Now. Please. Forget the dinner reservations at the fancy restaurant. Let's pick up our luggage and get the hell out of Washington."

I had nothing against the Holocaust Memorial Museum. I didn't want to leave because I thought it was poorly done. On the contrary, I thought it was done very well—maybe too well.

Home Sweet Plesivec
Summer 1968

By the time the Mercedes pulled into the town square, a small crowd had gathered. The peasants gawking did not surprise Willi. The arrival of a well-dressed family in a fancy car was certainly cause for curiosity in this small Czech village. Willi was sure that no one of consequence ever came to Plesivec, unless they were truly insane. The mental institution, he thought, was still probably the town's biggest industry, and maybe the only industry now that most of the Jews were gone.

The Jews had been the doctors and lawyers and business owners in this village as they had been in every Czech village, before everything. Now that most of the Jews were more than twenty years gone, Plesivec was shabby and broken.

Kati and Willi had taken the children to Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968 because they wanted to show them where they had been brought up. Plesivec was a three-hour ride from the five-star hotel where the family had stayed in Budapest.

We went to Plesivec after we had checked out of the Gellert Hotel in Budapest. The plan was to stop in Plesivec to see Kati's house, then go on to Jelsava. Yes, this would be the afternoon of the morning that our daughter Naomi had run away with the Gypsy and was found thanks to Zoltan Vas. But we did not speak of the Gypsy boy at all. Ronnie says he's shocked to hear that his sister had run off with a Gypsy? He says he was a clueless fourteen-year-old kid going along on a family vacation? That sounds like Ronnie.

Ronnie did not know because Willi and I decided not tell him. It wasn't hard to do. If Ronnie were around we'd simply speak in a language he did not understand. Unlike Naomi who has an ear for languages, Ronnie had never understood his parents like his older sister.

As Willi slowly drove down Plesivec's one street, he kept it to himself that he had always thought the place was an inconsequential little village. He thought it important Kati show the children where she had grown up through her own memories.

"Soon you will see the big beautiful stone house where I grew up. My father's pharmacy and grandfather's hardware store were in the front. Next door to my house you will see the house that belonged to my uncle, my grandfather's brother. It's a tremendous house with such a big gate that two cars can go through at the same time."

Willi noticed that Kati did not mention how her uncle's tremendous house was the very same house where they had put all the Jews of Plesivec when they created the ghetto.

Growing up in Plesivec, Kati never knew anti-Semitism—no one ever said you are a Jew or you are not a Jew. She didn't know the hatred.

In Plesivec, the Jews had been the professionals and store owners. Everyone depended on the Jews so I suppose it was important they show their better face, even if they hated us. I had no idea that people hated Jews. When they opened the ghetto and came for us to be interrogated, that's when they showed their hatred. It was the first time I saw the hatred. When I was taken for interrogation, I found out that people weren't as nice as I had thought.

There was a boy Kati had liked very much in elementary school—not as a boyfriend, but as a friend. She loved to play with this boy, to see who could run or ride their bicycles faster.

This is the boy who picked her up for her interrogation.

He came for Kati on her own bicycle, the very bicycle her grandfather had given her. Now it was the boy's and not hers.

"Get on the bike, Jew."

He rode Kati to the local police station. Her mother was already there, waiting in the hallway. Kati watched as Jew after Jew was brought into a room. Kati could hear everything that went on in that room, the interrogators sticking burning cigarettes to faces and hands while they asked, "Where did you hide your gold? Where is your money?"

They called Kati's name. Kati's mother was not allowed to go in with her. She went in alone.

I can still see everything.
I can still see the room.
There was a wooden desk and a chair.

I stood in front of the desk.
The local policeman was sitting there.
Behind him, one Hungarian Gendarme and two SS men.
That's when I first saw the difference between a regular German soldier and the SS.
I had never seen scarier human beings.
They didn't say a word.

Backed up by the Gendarme and the SS, the local policeman who had always been soft spoken and polite—the nicest man, really— whenever he came into her father's pharmacy, was suddenly a big tough guy.

"Listen little girl, if you know what's good for you, you will tell us where your parents hid their money."

Kati said she didn't know anything. She didn't. Finally, they let her go.

My mother they asked a million questions. When she came out she had three cigarette burns on her hand, but she held back from crying. We always protected each other in those days by being brave or making believe it's okay, it will all go away.

Willi parked the Mercedes in Plesivec's town square.

"Kati, this is it. Aren't you going to get out?"

She snubbed out her cigarette. "Give me a minute."

A wrinkled face peered through the windshield.

Someone shouted, "Katarina Kellner!"

My wife looks like her mother and grandmother. People immediately recognized her. More people started coming from their houses. More and more, they came.

The villagers surrounded Kati and started talking, all friendly.

"It's so good to see you!"

"You're as beautiful as your mother and grandmother!"

"Did you come for your house?"

"I remember when your father had the pharmacy. Such a nice man."

"Are these your children? Beautiful children."

"What happened to your parents?"

Kati was just standing there and looking. She didn't answer.

All I could think was that these were the people who cheered when we were taken away. Why were they being so nice? They were probably afraid that I was going to throw out whoever was living in my house. My Uncle Pavel had died and his children had left Czechoslovakia. I didn't know who was in the house. I didn't care. I didn't care about the house.

After five or ten minutes, Kati said let's leave.

Willi was abrupt. "Naomi. Ronnie. Get in the car. Now."

Ronnie hopped into the backseat.

Naomi asked, "What about the house? Aren't we going to see the house? Didn't we come here to see the house?

"Naomi. Get in the car. Now."

I was worried about Kati and I'm afraid I was quite sharp with Naomi.

As they drove away, Kati eyes fixed on the live chickens waiting for the butcher in the windows of her father's pharmacy and grandfather's crystal and hardware store.

When they reached Willi's village of Jelsava, Kati asked if they could please not get out of the car. She had seen enough. The family continued on. Outside of Bratislava, they encountered endless rows of Russian tanks. A few days after they returned to America, Russia invaded Czechoslovakia.

Post Trip

After the 1968 visit, Kati swore she would never go back to Czechoslovakia, and Willi better not think he's ever setting foot there again, either.

"That's it. We are never going back."

Kati never did.

But Willi did, two years later, without telling her.

Can you believe this? After the 1968 trip, Willi and I went back to Budapest a couple of years later to stay at a fancy spa. Willi wanted to stay for three weeks but I said two weeks was enough for me, so I came back home while he stayed. But he didn't stay in Budapest. He rented a car and went all over Czechoslovakia.

I didn't tell her.

No, he didn't tell me. He didn't tell me for a very long time.

I was afraid she would get angry.

In Jelsava, Willi parked his car and walked up to the Weisz family home. How strange it had been for Lilly and him to move into this house after the War. Before the War, his grandmother Hermina and his Uncles Alexander, Eugene and Julius had all lived here. Actually, Willi thought, the Weisz family had always been a pretty peculiar household. His uncles had worked together in the family business, lived together in this house, but refused to speak to each other. They were always angry and not speaking for one reason or another. But that quiet was nothing compared to the dead silence in the house after the War.

The house was in disrepair and looked to have been split up into apartments. The vast property behind the house was filled with concrete building complexes blurred by the haze from the spewing smokestacks.

Leaving the village, Willi saw a stout woman, her hair covered by a scarf. Could it be Etta, the one who had such beautiful hair? He passed the park in the middle of the village, now barren of its majestic trees.

Willi left, never looking back.

Sunshine
1999

In the movie Sunshine, William Hurt plays an Auschwitz survivor who says, "Surviving it doesn't make a man better or greater. It's just something that remains inside the brain."

I'm glad you had a chance to see this movie. As I had mentioned, this movie most accurately depicts to me what it had been like to be a Jew in Budapest. And as far as the lines from the movie, I know my son Ronnie believes his mother and I are heroes, but there was nothing heroic in surviving the camps. This does not make a person a hero. Surviving was luck. Kati and I were both young and strong when we were taken, which meant physically we had an advantage and were able to endure more than most. The fact that we survived was simply a matter of the War coming to an end and the Americans showing up. All luck. A few more days in Gunskirchen and I would have been dead.

Does it make me a better person for having survived the camps? I know it's left me with knowing what people can do to people—a knowledge I would rather live without. No, this doesn't make me better—it simply means I know what people are capable of. If anything, it makes me want to warn people that there is a certain kind of hatred always lying just below the surface of civilization—and not simply hatred for the Jew—it's a hatred that one group can have for any group of people. Everyday, we must guard against the emergence of this hatred. It is our only hope.

Happy Anniversary
1995

More than half a century together and I'm still wild about this guy. Yes, fifty years. We had our fiftieth anniversary in 1995, a big wonderful party. I have photographs. Let me go get them.

Please, while Kati is getting the photographs allow me to pour you some wine.

Oh good, Willi. You thought to offer some wine.

I know how to be a good host. I can even make coffee.

You, make coffee?

What is there to making coffee? You put it in. You press a button.

PHOTO

Here is a photo of us with the children. That's me on the left. Here is Ronnie. This is Naomi. And Willi.

This photograph is also from the anniversary party. Willi and I are with the grandchildren. That is Lilly to my left.

PHOTO

Look, here is the photo of my grandparents. I don't think you have seen this. It's one that Ilka had saved.

PHOTO

This was taken behind the house where my family also lived. My grandfather grew a mustache because he had lost all his teeth when he was held prisoner in the First World War.

Kati has the same smile as her grandmother, a smile that can light everything up.

Yes, that small building in the photograph is the cottage that I had moved into after the war.

If it's all right, tomorrow when we meet, I will speak to you alone first and then Kati will speak to you. Good, I will see you tomorrow at one o'clock. Have a good evening.

Just one question before you go. How do you think this book will end?

September
2001

On September 11, 2001, Kati and Willi were on a cruise to Nova Scotia. When they returned to New York, the World Trade Center was still burning. From their apartment window, Willi's engineer mind considered why the towers had collapsed.

But Kati saw her mother.

"I never thought I'd see that grey smoke again."

Not long after, I had lunch with a granddaughter who had been working downtown when the planes crashed. She had to run for her life. She told me she finally understood what it must have felt like for her grandfather and me. I was very sorry to hear this. I was very sorry that she finally understood. I preferred when young people thought what we survivors had to say was irrelevant and incidental to their lives. For so many years, there was a part of me that wanted people to understand. Sometimes it was so frustrating when they couldn't understand. But you know, their understanding is worse.

Return to Sender
2002

Central Claims Adjustment Office
Claims Adjustment Office of the Capital
1116 Budapest, Hauszmann A. u. I.

Katarina Salcer
10021 New York, NY
XXX E 72nd Str. Apt A 21
USA

Dear Client,

Enclosed we are providing you with the decision rendered in connection with your restitution/compensation claim based on the Law XXIX of 1997.

In reviewing the unresolved cases, we have determined that the above decision has been mailed to your address, but it was returned to us with the note, "Moved" or "Did not pick up". The return receipt was not sent back either so the decision is not final. We are sending it to your address again.

Budapest, 2002 August 27

Sincerely,

Dr. Szilagyi Aniko
Office Manager
Stamp of the Central Claims Adjustment Office

Numerous times since the Hungarian government awarded Kati $10.50 in damages for her father and his gold watch, they have written requesting a return receipt. I suppose they are looking to close their books on the Holocaust. No, I have not told Kati about the $10.50—It's such an insult to her father that I saw no good coming from her knowing. Since I have talked about it I will tell her—probably not a good idea for her to read about it first.

Yes, it is interesting. One thinks they are writing about the Holocaust and discovers they've written a love story.